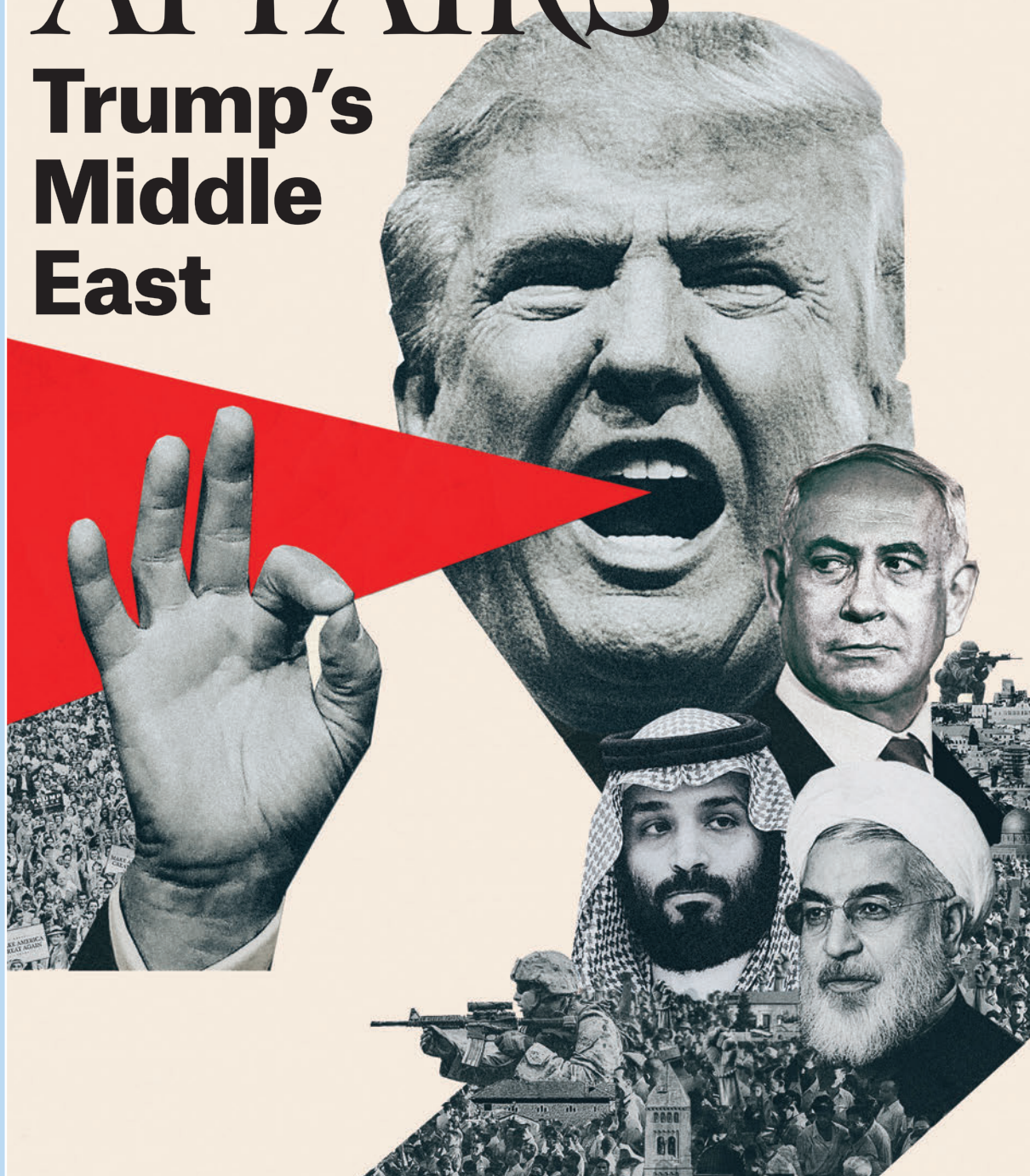


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# FOREIGN AFFAIRS

## Trump's Middle East

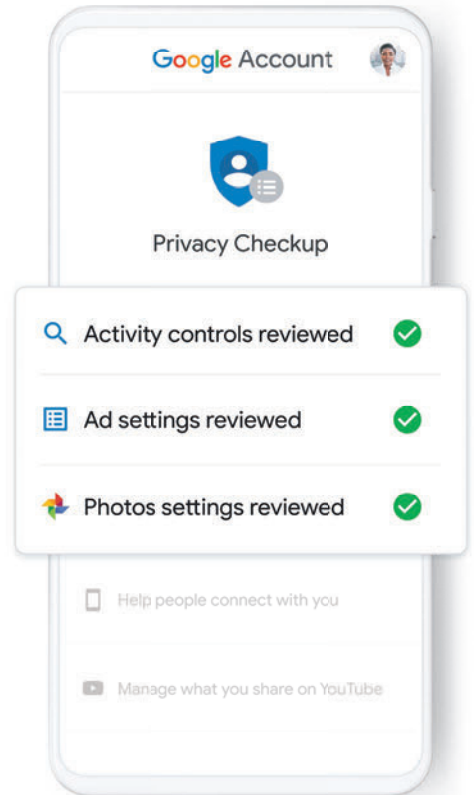


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# FOREIGN AFFAIRS



*Volume 98, Number 6*

## TRUMP'S MIDDLE EAST

**Disaster in the Desert** 10  
Why Trump's Middle East Plan Can't Work  
*Martin Indyk*

**The Dream Palace of the Americans** 21  
Why Ceding Land Will Not Bring Peace  
*Michael S. Doran*

**There Will Be a One-State Solution** 30  
But What Kind of State Will It Be?  
*Yousef Munayyer*

**The Unwanted Wars** 38  
Why the Middle East Is More Combustible Than Ever  
*Robert Malley*

**The Middle East's Lost Decades** 48  
Development, Dissent, and the Future of the Arab World  
*Maha Yahya*

**America's Great Satan** 56  
The 40-Year Obsession With Iran  
*Daniel Benjamin and Steven Simon*

**The Tunisia Model** 67  
Lessons From a New Arab Democracy  
*Sarah Yerkes*



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## ESSAYS

**War Is Not Over** 74  
What the Optimists Get Wrong About Conflict  
*Tanisha M. Fazal and Paul Poast*

---

**The Nonintervention Delusion** 84  
What War Is Good For  
*Richard Fontaine*

---

**The Unwinnable Trade War** 99  
Everyone Loses in the U.S.-Chinese Clash—but Especially Americans  
*Weijian Shan*

---

**The Progressive Case Against Protectionism** 109  
How Trade and Immigration Help American Workers  
*Kimberly Clausing*

---

**Nowhere to Go** 122  
How Governments in the Americas Are Bungling the Migration Crisis  
*Alexander Betts*

---

**Let Russia Be Russia** 134  
The Case for a More Pragmatic Approach to Moscow  
*Thomas Graham*

---

**Beyond Great Forces** 148  
How Individuals Still Shape History  
*Daniel Byman and Kenneth M. Pollack*

## ON FOREIGNAFFAIRS.COM

► **Pratap Bhanu Mehta**  
on the gutting of  
India's democracy.

► **Alexander Stille** on  
Italy's precarious  
triumph over populism.

► **Kristine Lee** on  
Chinese leadership at  
the United Nations.



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## REVIEWS & RESPONSES

**Obama's Idealists** 162  
**American Power in Theory and Practice**  
*Peter Beinart*

---

**How a Caliphate Ends** 170  
**On the Frontline of the Fight Against ISIS**  
*Anne Barnard*

---

**What Is White America?** 177  
**The Identity Politics of the Majority**  
*Nell Irvin Painter*

---

**The Virtue of Monopoly** 184  
**Why the Stock Market Stopped Working**  
*Felix Salmon*

---

**The New Masters of the Universe** 191  
**Big Tech and the Business of Surveillance**  
*Paul Starr*

---

**Recent Books** 198

---

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November/December 2019 • Volume 98, Number 6

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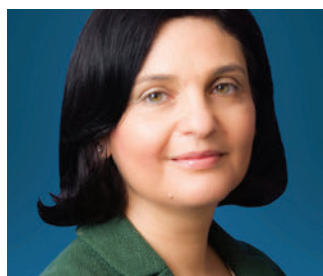


## CONTRIBUTORS

Writing in these pages in 2002, **MICHAEL DORAN**, then a professor at Princeton, was among the first to argue that the primary motive behind the 9/11 attacks was to fuel conflict within the Muslim world. Doran went on to serve in the George W. Bush administration, working in the White House, the State Department, and the Pentagon. In “The Dream Palace of the Americans” (page 21), Doran, now a senior fellow at the Hudson Institute, argues that only the Trump administration’s return to blunt power politics will yield any progress in the Israeli-Palestinian quagmire.



**MAHA YAHYA** holds the rare distinction of having completed two doctoral dissertations, both on the connections among politics, memory, and urban change. From 2012 to 2018, Yahya led UN efforts to promote development and democratization in 17 Arab countries. She also advised the World Bank and the UN Development Program on social and urban policy across the region. In “The Middle East’s Lost Decades” (page 48), Yahya, now director of the Carnegie Middle East Center, discusses why so many Arab states have stalled politically and economically.



The son of Chinese civil servants, **WEIJIAN SHAN** grew up at the height of the Cultural Revolution and as a teenager spent six years as a forced laborer in the Gobi Desert. After obtaining several degrees in the United States, he taught at the Wharton School. Shan quickly rose to become one of the country’s most successful financiers, serving as managing director of J.P. Morgan. Today, Shan is chair and CEO of the Hong Kong–based private equity firm PAG. In “The Unwinnable Trade War” (page 99), he argues that U.S. tariffs against China will miss their intended target—and inflict the most damage on the United States itself.



**PETER BEINART** was editor of *The New Republic* from 1999 to 2006 and has written three books on American foreign policy, including *The Icarus Syndrome: A History of American Hubris*. Today, he is a professor of journalism at CUNY’s Craig Newmark Graduate School of Journalism and a professor of political science at the CUNY Graduate Center. He also is a contributing editor at *The Atlantic*. In “Obama’s Idealists” (page 162), Beinart reviews the memoirs of three foreign policy hands in the Obama administration: Susan Rice, Samantha Power, and Ben Rhodes.



## TRUMP'S MIDDLE EAST

**T**he Trump administration's Middle East policies jumped into the headlines this past summer, as the region moved to the brink of war. Since the situation is confused and confusing, we've compiled a guide for the perplexed.

The Middle East has a distinct history, culture, and geopolitical logic, with local powers locked in an eternally shifting great game. Too weak to avoid temporary domination by outsiders, they are nevertheless strong enough to resist full absorption. As a result, grand schemes for regional order inevitably go up in smoke, the exasperated foreigners eventually leave, and the game continues.

In the mid-twentieth century, the United States took over from the United Kingdom as the outside power of record. By the 1970s, it had to deal with the residue of the Six-Day War, in which Israel captured territory from Egypt, Jordan, and Syria. U.S. Secretary of State Henry Kissinger used American diplomacy to facilitate the transfer of land for peace, setting in motion decades of what is now known as "the Middle East peace process." But by 2016, that process had ground to a halt. Most incoming administrations would have tried to get it going again. Instead, President Donald Trump pulled the plug.

Martin Indyk explains how the administration abandoned a half century of U.S. policy for a dream of hegemony on the cheap—continued U.S. withdrawal, with the containment of Iran

contracted out to Israel and Saudi Arabia. The new course is a fiasco, he argues, and has led directly to the current crisis.

Not so, responds Michael Doran. It was President Jimmy Carter who abandoned Kissinger's policy, inserting a personal obsession with the Palestinian question into the American position. The successes of the peace process, such as Israel's treaties with Egypt and Jordan, were sensible material bargains, not quests for justice. Similar deals with Syria and the Palestinians are highly unlikely. Trump's real crime is acknowledging this, shattering long-held illusions.

Israeli power does make a two-state solution impossible, agrees Yousef Munayyer—which is a good thing, because no Palestinian Bantustan achieved through the existing peace process could fulfill Palestinian national aspirations. Instead, both peoples should live in a single constitutional democracy that would offer equal rights to Jews and Palestinians alike.

Beyond the Arab-Israeli issue, things get even more challenging. Robert Malley and Maha Yahya sketch the region's unique strategic dynamics and developmental challenges, respectively; Daniel Benjamin and Steven Simon look at its most persistent headache, Iran; and Sarah Yerkes reports on its sole glimmer of hope, Tunisia.

These articles offer a clear window onto the Middle East's stark new landscape. Read them and weep.

—Gideon Rose, *Editor*

*The Trump administration abandoned a half century of U.S. Middle East policy for a dream of hegemony on the cheap.*



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**Disaster in the Desert**

*Martin Indyk*

10

---

**The Middle East's Lost Decades**

*Maha Yahya*

48

---

**The Dream Palace of the Americans**

*Michael S. Doran*

21

---

**America's Great Satan**

*Daniel Benjamin and Steven Simon*

56

---

**There Will Be a One-State Solution**

*Yousef Munayyer*

30

---

**The Tunisia Model**

*Sarah Yerkes*

67

---

**The Unwanted Wars**

*Robert Malley*

38



# Disaster in the Desert

## Why Trump's Middle East Plan Can't Work

*Martin Indyk*

**I**n July 2019, Jason Greenblatt, then U.S. President Donald Trump's envoy for Israeli-Palestinian negotiations, attended a routine quarterly UN Security Council meeting about the Middle East. Providing an update on the Trump administration's thinking about the peace process, he pointedly told the surprised audience that the United States no longer respected the "fiction" of an international consensus on the Israeli-Palestinian issue.

Greenblatt went out of his way to attack not some extreme or obscure measure but UN Security Council Resolution 242, the foundation of half a century of Arab-Israeli negotiations and of every agreement Israel has achieved within them, including the peace treaties with Egypt and Jordan. He railed against its ambiguous wording, which has shielded Israel for decades against Arab demands for a full withdrawal from occupied territory, as "tired rhetoric designed to prevent progress and bypass direct negotiations" and claimed that it had hurt rather than helped the chances for real peace in the region.

**MARTIN INDYK** is a Distinguished Fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations and the author of the forthcoming book *Henry Kissinger and the Art of the Middle East Deal*. He has served as U.S. Ambassador to Israel, Assistant U.S. Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs, and Special Envoy for Israeli-Palestinian Negotiations.

The indignation was calculated. Guided by his boss Jared Kushner, the president's son-in-law and senior adviser on the Middle East, Greenblatt was trying to change the conversation, to "start a new, realistic discussion" of the subject. UN resolutions, international law, global consensus—all that was irrelevant. From now on, Washington would no longer advocate a two-state solution to the conflict, with independent Jewish and Palestinian states living alongside each other in peace and security.

Greenblatt's presentation was part of a broader campaign by the Trump administration to break with the past and create a new Middle Eastern order. To please a president who likes simple, cost-free answers, the administration's strategists appear to have come up with a clever plan. The United States can continue to withdraw from the region but face no adverse consequences for doing so, because Israel and Saudi Arabia will pick up the slack. Washington will subcontract the job of containing Iran, the principal source of regional instability, to Israel and Saudi Arabia in the Levant and the Persian Gulf, respectively. And the two countries' common interest in countering Iran will improve their bilateral relationship, on which Israel can build a tacit alliance with the Sunni Arab world. The proxies get broad leeway to execute Washington's mandate at will, and their patron gets a new, Trumpian order on the cheap. Unfortunately, this vision is a fantasy.

In the mid-1970s, even as the United States retrenched after its defeat in Vietnam, U.S. Secretary of State Henry Kissinger successfully laid the foundations for a new, U.S.-led Middle Eastern order. His main tool was active diplo-



*Let's make a deal: Melania Trump, Donald Trump, and King Salman in Riyadh, May 2017*

macy to reconcile Israel and its Arab neighbors. In many respects, his efforts and those that followed were strikingly successful, producing peace treaties between Israel and Egypt and between Israel and Jordan, as well as an interim agreement with the Palestinians.

Progress stalled during the twenty-first century, however, as the second intifada dashed hopes for Israeli-Palestinian reconciliation, the Iraq war empowered a revolutionary Iran, and the Arab Spring destabilized the region and triggered the rise of the Islamic State, or ISIS.

Whoever won the presidency in 2016, therefore, would have faced a bleak

diplomatic landscape in the Middle East. Any recent administration would have responded to this situation by going back to basics and painstakingly trying to reconstruct the order Kissinger built, since it has, on balance, served U.S. interests well. Instead, the Trump administration decided to blow up what was left.

This is not reckless mayhem or mere domestic politics, goes the official line, but creative destruction—demolition necessary to clear the ground for a grand new diplomatic structure opening soon. The brochures look great; they always do. But it is just another illusion.

The Trump administration likes to see itself as clear-eyed and tough-minded, a confronter of the hard truths others refuse to acknowledge. In fact, it understands so little about how the Middle East actually works that its bungling efforts have been a failure across the board. As so often in the past, the cynical locals are manipulating a clueless outsider, advancing their personal agendas at the naive Americans' expense.

The Trump administration's Middle East policies cannot possibly create a new, more stable regional order. But they will certainly do a good job of continuing the destruction of the old one, and risking all that it had gained. And this will fit neatly into Trump's overall campaign to do away with the liberal international order in favor of the law of the jungle.

## **O JERUSALEM**

Each aspect of the Trump administration's supposed new strategic triangle is misconceived, starting with Iran, a hostile would-be regional hegemon with a well-advanced nuclear program that Washington has been trying to contain for decades. In 2015, U.S. and European diplomats made a major breakthrough by negotiating the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), a classic multilateral arms control agreement that finally brought Iran's nuclear program under extensive international supervision. By the time Trump entered office, the agreement was functioning well in practice, and its inspections provided a high degree of confidence that Iran was not actively pursuing a nuclear weapons program.

The deal was hardly perfect. Its terms enabled Iran to resume parts of its nuclear program after ten years, it did not deal adequately with Iran's ballistic

missile program, and it did not address Iran's aggressive efforts at regional destabilization. Still, the agreement took the nuclear file off the table and set a pattern for how to resolve contentious disputes. So the obvious next step for any incoming administration would have been to build on the JCPOA and tackle the other issues on the docket. Instead, in May 2018, overruling then Secretary of State Rex Tillerson and Secretary of Defense James Mattis and blatantly lying about Iran's compliance, Trump shredded the agreement.

This was partly due to Trump's personal obsession with Barack Obama. Anything his predecessor had done had to be undone, and the Iran deal was Obama's signature accomplishment. But there was more to it than pique. In a speech soon after the U.S. withdrawal from the deal, Trump's new secretary of state, Mike Pompeo, unveiled the administration's "maximum pressure" campaign of reimposed sanctions to cut off Iran's oil exports, an effort that was designed to prevent the country from having "carte blanche to dominate the Middle East." Pompeo issued a list of demands that together amounted to Iranian capitulation: no uranium enrichment, ever; no interference with the International Atomic Energy Agency's inspections, anywhere; no development of nuclear-capable missiles; no support for Hamas, Hezbollah, Palestinian Islamic Jihad, Iraqi Shiite militias, the Taliban, or Yemen's Houthis; no Iranian-commanded forces in any part of Syria; and no threatening behavior toward Israel, Saudi Arabia, or the United Arab Emirates. In case there was any doubt, Pompeo was explicit: there would be no renegotiation of the JCPOA.



These moves were not coordinated with U.S. allies and partners. The appeals of the other signatories to the JCPOA—China, Russia, the United Kingdom, France, Germany, and the EU—were ignored, and they were even threatened with U.S. sanctions if they dared to buy Iranian oil, in contradiction to the agreement they had signed.

Meanwhile, the president was determined to withdraw U.S. forces from the region even more quickly than his predecessor had. The administration dramatically increased its demands on Iran, in other words, at precisely the same time that it was reducing its ability and will to deter Tehran's nefarious activity in the region. The gap between rhetoric and reality was best expressed by Pompeo, who, one month after Trump made clear that he was determined to remove every remaining U.S. soldier from Syria, declared that the United States intended to "expel every last Iranian boot" from the country.

The chasm between intentions and capabilities would not be a problem, the Trump team insisted, because most of the burden of containing Iran would be borne by Washington's two powerful regional partners, Israel and Saudi Arabia. There was a superficial logic to this approach, since Israel is now the strongest power in the region and Saudi Arabia is rich and influential. But it cannot stand up to scrutiny.

Israel has formidable military capabilities and a common interest with Sunni Arab states in countering Iran, but the United States cannot depend on the Jewish state to promote its interests in the Arab world. Israel's unresolved conflict with the Palestinians has placed a ceiling on its ability to cooperate

publicly with its neighbors. Arab states are often willing to make common cause with Israel under the table; Saudi Arabia has been doing so since the 1960s. But an open association with the Jewish state would allow Iran to pummel them for their apostasy and generate domestic dissent.

In February of this year, for example, Trump and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu attempted to organize an anti-Iran conference in Poland. Netanyahu tweeted that it was "an open meeting with representatives of leading Arab countries, that are sitting down together with Israel in order to advance the common interest of combating Iran." Yet the Arab foreign ministers refused to appear on the same panel with him in the conference's general forum. The best the Israeli leader could do was post an illicitly filmed video on YouTube of the foreign ministers of Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates discussing Israel. (The video was quickly taken down.) As for the United States' European allies, they mostly sent low-level representatives, whose fate there was to be publicly chastised by U.S. Vice President Mike Pence for attempting to discourage Iran from breaking out of the nuclear agreement.

In Syria, meanwhile, Israel can't achieve its objective of evicting the Iranian presence, which includes Iranian-backed militias with some 40,000 troops, without outside help. But with the United States heading for the exits there, Israel has had no choice but to seek Russia's assistance, given its military presence and its influence on the Assad regime. Repeated visits by Netanyahu to Moscow, however, have

gained only Russian President Vladimir Putin's qualified acquiescence in Israeli airstrikes on Iranian targets. The Israeli prime minister had hoped to use U.S. pressure and promises of sanctions relief to persuade Russia to press Iran to leave Syria, but that plan didn't pan out either. This past June, Netanyahu invited the top U.S. and Russian national security advisers to Jerusalem to discuss joint action against Tehran. There, the Russian poured cold water on the plan, explaining publicly that Russia and Iran were cooperating on counterterrorism issues, that Iran's interests in Syria needed to be acknowledged, and that Israeli airstrikes on Iranian assets in Syria were "undesirable."

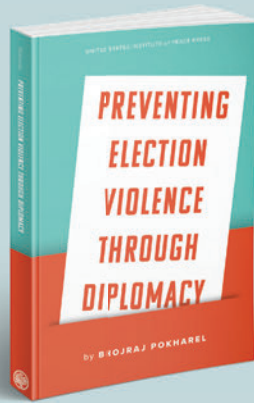
Netanyahu was so alarmed by Trump's surprise announcement that he would withdraw residual U.S. troops from eastern Syria, where they were helping prevent Iran from establishing a land bridge from Iraq to Lebanon, that he had to plead with the White House to delay the withdrawal. But this stopgap measure has done nothing to remove Iran's Syrian strongholds, and hundreds of Israeli strikes on Iranian positions have only increased the risk that the conflict will spread to Iraq and Lebanon and escalate to a full-scale war between Israel and Hezbollah.

Israel's border with Syria had been quiet for almost four decades after Kissinger negotiated the Israeli-Syrian disengagement agreement in 1974. The agreement included a carefully negotiated side deal between the United States and Syria that committed the Assad regime to preventing terrorists from operating against Israel from the Syrian side of the Golan Heights. The disengagement agreement was based on UN Security Council Resolution 242,

with its explicit prohibition on the acquisition of territory by force, which made clear that the Golan Heights was Syrian sovereign territory. Nevertheless, that UN resolution, which Greenblatt was so keen to disparage before the UN Security Council, allowed Israel to retain possession of the Golan Heights until a final peace agreement was reached. That is why Israel never annexed the territory, even though it considers it strategically crucial, maintains settlements there, and even has established vineyards and a robust tourism industry in the area. (Instead of claiming sovereignty, in a controversial decision in 1981, Prime Minister Menachem Begin extended Israeli law to the Golan, for which Israel was condemned by the UN Security Council, with the United States voting in favor.)

Israel and Syria managed to keep their deal going for generations, even upholding it as the latter descended into civil war and anarchy. When Netanyahu asked for Russia's help in keeping Iranian-backed militias out of the Golan Heights in July 2018, he explicitly invoked the disengagement agreement, as did Putin in his press conference with Trump at their ill-fated Helsinki summit that same month. But that was all before Netanyahu sought Trump's help in his latest reelection bid. In what Trump subsequently referred to as a "quickie" briefing, he was asked on Netanyahu's behalf by Kushner and David Friedman, the U.S. ambassador to Israel, to recognize Israeli sovereignty over the Golan Heights (without even informing Pompeo, who happened to be visiting Israel at the time).

Trump was quick to agree. "I went, 'bing!'—it was done," he later told the Republican Jewish Coalition at its annual meeting in Las Vegas. And so in



Why do efforts to prevent election violence succeed in some cases yet fail in others? Focusing on three case studies of countries with a history of election violence, *Preventing Election Violence through Diplomacy* identifies the key dimensions of preventive diplomacy to prevent or reduce election violence. Drawing on personal experience, the literature, and expert interviews and roundtables with academics and practitioners, the book highlights conditions for the success and the failure of preventive diplomacy, offering recommendations to the international community for maximizing the efficacy of this unique tool.

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*—Geoffrey Macdonald, Bangladesh Country Director at the International Republican Institute*

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*—B. Lynn Pascoe, Former Under-Secretary-General for Political Affairs at the United Nations*



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March of this year, he issued a presidential proclamation declaring that the Golan Heights was part of Israel. Trump boasted that he had done something no other president was willing to do. He was clearly unaware that no previous Israeli government had been willing to do it either, knowing that it would violate a core principle of UN Security Council Resolution 242 and not wanting to reap the whirlwind.

The cheap political gambit wasn't even successful. Netanyahu couldn't secure a majority in national elections two weeks later and was forced to take part in another campaign in the fall, in which he came up short again. But Trump's snap decision will have lasting implications, undermining the disengagement agreement, giving Putin justification for his illegal annexation of Crimea, and reinforcing U.S. and Israeli diplomatic isolation. The result is a Tehran now free to establish its militias' presence on the Syrian side of the border—with the blessing of Damascus, unconstrained by the antiterrorism commitment that Hafez al-Assad made to Kissinger all those decades ago. Sure enough, by July of this year, Israel was finding it necessary to bomb Hezbollah positions in the Golan Heights, left with violence as its only tool to prevent Iran from making mischief there.

### **SAUDI STYLE**

Saudi Arabia has proved to be an even weaker reed for the United States to lean on. Riyadh has never before sought to lead the Arab world in war and peace. Recognizing their country's limitations as a rich yet vulnerable state with a fragile domestic consensus, Saudi rulers have preferred to play a quiet, support-

ing role in the American-led order. Egypt, Iraq, and Syria were always the key players in Arab politics. But with Iraq battered, Syria in chaos, and a stagnant Egypt being whipsawed by revolution and counterrevolution, the way was clear for an ambitious, headstrong, and ruthless young Saudi prince to stake his country's claim to Arab leadership. Coming to power in 2015, at the age of 29, Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, known as MBS, first consolidated his control over the kingdom's military and security apparatus and then launched an ambitious economic development program at home and aggressive interventions abroad, including a brutal campaign to suppress Iranian-backed Houthi rebels in Yemen.

Newly exposed to Middle Eastern diplomacy on taking office, Trump jumped at the short-term benefits Saudi Arabia promised to deliver in both security and economics (a \$350 billion arms deal that never materialized and the promise of huge investments in the United States). The young Saudi scion soon developed a bromance with his American counterpart, Kushner, which led to Trump's first trip abroad, to an Arab and Islamic summit in Riyadh in 2017. This gathering was supposed to facilitate greater cooperation on counter- ing violent extremism across the region; its sole tangible result was Trump's greenlighting of an Emirati-Saudi decision to blockade neighboring Qatar, a crucial U.S. partner in the Gulf because it hosts Al Udeid Air Base, the largest U.S. military facility in the Middle East.

Instead of focusing on Iran, the Saudis had duped Trump into taking sides in a local ideological contest, against another American friend to boot. The result was to split the Gulf Cooperation Council,

further undermining its already limited ability to counter Iran in the Gulf, while driving Qatar into Iran's arms, since it had no other way of maintaining access to the world except by utilizing Iranian airspace, something which the Iranians were only too happy to provide. This fiasco has bedeviled the administration ever since, with the Saudis blocking all attempts at patching up the rift.

MBS's war in Yemen has also created the worst humanitarian crisis in the world. Saudi Arabia's atrocities against Yemeni civilians, carried out with U.S.-supplied aircraft using U.S. ordnance, have brought global outrage. The damage to the United States' reputation has been so great that a bipartisan congressional consensus tried to suspend arms sales to Saudi Arabia. Trump brushed aside the challenge, but only by invoking executive powers, which further infuriated Congress and has jeopardized the sustainability of one of the pillars of the U.S.-Saudi relationship.

MBS's determination to seek a military solution in Yemen has met its match in the Houthis, whose dependence on Iran has grown with their ambitions to rule the country. Tehran is now supplying them with ballistic missiles and armed drones for use against Saudi targets, including civilian airports and oil facilities. (Hence initial suspicions of Houthi involvement in a September attack that took out almost half of Saudi Arabia's oil production capacity. Although the disruption was short lived, Saudi Arabia's once stalwart reliability as the world's largest oil exporter has been put in doubt by the unintended consequences of its Trump-encouraged adventurism.)

The outrages continued to pile up when MBS apparently ordered the

murder of the Saudi dissident Jamal Khashoggi by Saudi officials in the Saudi consulate in Istanbul in 2018. Trump and Netanyahu did their best to shield their Saudi partner from international condemnation, and Trump even restricted congressional access to intelligence about the murder, sowing further divisions in Washington. With Riyadh so dependent on Washington and MBS momentarily vulnerable to intrafamily rivalries, the White House could have used the crisis to insist that MBS take responsibility for the murder and rein in his foreign exploits. But Trump didn't even try, allowing the efficacy of Saudi leadership of the anti-Iran coalition to be further undermined.

Nor has Saudi Arabia helped much on the peace process. Experienced hands could have told Trump that the Saudis would never get out ahead of the Palestinians. But Trump had given responsibility for the peace process to Kushner, who was impressed by MBS's refreshingly open attitude to Israel and disdain for the Palestinians and uninterested in the lessons of past failures. In 2017, MBS promised Kushner that he could deliver the Palestinian leader Mahmoud Abbas to the negotiating table on Trump's terms. He summoned Abbas to Riyadh and told him to accept Kushner's ideas in exchange for \$10 billion in Saudi funding. Instead, Abbas refused and promptly leaked the details of the exchange, causing a furor in the Arab world.

MBS also promised Kushner that Saudi Arabia would acquiesce in Trump's recognition of Jerusalem as Israel's capital and reassured him that any negative reaction on the Arab street would die down in a couple of months. That was enough for Trump to dismiss all objections and announce his decision at

the end of 2017 to recognize Jerusalem as Israel's capital and to move the U.S. embassy there.

MBS was right about the reaction in the Arab street; it was hardly noticeable. But he had failed to warn Kushner of the other consequences. The crown prince might not have cared about Jerusalem, but his father certainly did. And while MBS may have been in day-to-day control of the kingdom's affairs, final say still lay with King Salman. The al Aqsa mosque, in Jerusalem, is Islam's third-holiest shrine; as custodian of the two others, King Salman could not stay silent. He promptly condemned Trump's decision and summoned the region's Arab leaders to a meeting the following April to denounce it collectively. King Salman has repeatedly stated ever since that Saudi Arabia will not support any settlement that does not provide for an independent Palestinian state with East Jerusalem as its capital—something Trump refuses to endorse.

The Jerusalem decision and embassy move blew up Kushner's scheme to have Saudi Arabia play a leading role in the peace process. It also drove the Palestinians away from the negotiating table. In the wake of the decision, they cut off all official contact with the Trump administration, with Abbas condemning the forthcoming Trump peace plan as "a shameful bargain" that will "go to hell." When Kushner unveiled the economic dimensions of Trump's peace plan at a meeting in Bahrain this past June—designed to show the Palestinians that they would benefit from peace—the Palestinians boycotted the conference.

Bullying was no more effective than bribing. Trump thought the Palestinians were so weak that he could bludgeon

them into submission by cutting off aid, closing down the Palestine Liberation Organization's office in Washington and the U.S. consulate general in Jerusalem, and attempting to eliminate the UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East. Once again, as anybody with experience in the region could have predicted, this didn't work. Punishing the Palestinians only made them dig in their heels and rally behind their (otherwise unpopular) leadership.

Without the Saudis and the Palestinians, Kushner had little chance to secure Egyptian or Jordanian support for the crucial part of the plan, the political and security arrangements. King Abdullah of Jordan, in particular, became increasingly alarmed by the prospect that he might have to choose between Trump and the Palestinians if Kushner came forward with Trump's ideas. King Abdullah's largely Palestinian population would be furious if he accepted the plan, yet he feared alienating Trump and jeopardizing his billion-dollar annual aid package if he rejected it. (The Palestinian Authority was already finding alternatives to Trump's aid cuts, but those sources weren't available to Jordan.) Nevertheless, when Kushner made his final ask this past summer, the king refused—after which the launch of the full plan was once again rescheduled for some "more appropriate" time. Recognizing that it had no future, Greenblatt resigned.

Another Saudi-inspired initiative, the proposed Middle East Strategic Alliance, also went nowhere. Riyadh assumed that Trump could pull the neighboring Arab states into a coalition to counter Iran. Dubbed the "Arab NATO," it had Egypt, Jordan, and the Gulf Cooperation Council coming together under a U.S.



security umbrella to enhance their cooperation and, as a White House spokesperson put it, “serve as a bulwark against Iranian aggression.” Israel would be a silent partner. The project’s internal contradictions revealed themselves at the initial meeting in September 2017, and it quickly stalled. Trump eventually appointed Anthony Zinni, a former commander of U.S. Central Command, as a special envoy to move things forward. Given the reluctance of the other Arab states to bait the Iranian bear, however, Zinni was unable to make any headway, and he resigned in January. Three months later, Egypt withdrew, and the initiative died.

### **IRAN AMOK**

Just like its blundering on other fronts, the Trump administration’s efforts on Iran have produced few positive results. It seemed for a while that the “maximum pressure” campaign was reducing Iran’s funding of its proxies abroad. Yet those operations have always been run on the cheap, and with some belt-tightening, they have continued apace. Hezbollah is still trying to add precision-guided missiles to its arsenal in Lebanon, Iranian-backed militias in Syria are staying put, and the Houthis in Yemen and Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad in Gaza have actually had their funding increased.

Not content with the maximum, in April of this year, Trump dialed up the pressure even further by designating Iran’s Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps as a terrorist organization and denying waivers to China and India for the purchase of Iranian oil. With its economy crashing and the Europeans failing to provide adequate sanctions relief, Tehran decided enough was enough.

Up to that point, the Iranians had been exercising what they termed “strategic patience”—waiting for the 2020 U.S. presidential election, toughing things out in the meantime, and keeping the Europeans onboard by sticking to the nuclear agreement. Now, Iran decided to retaliate.

First, it reduced its compliance with the JCPOA by expanding its stockpile of low-enriched uranium. Then, it resumed higher levels of enrichment. And in September, it restarted centrifuge development, shortening the breakout time for nuclear weapons production. Since Trump was the first to walk away from the accord, ripping up the painstakingly developed international legal consensus that prevented Iran’s acquisition of nuclear weapons, the United States was in no position to say or do anything to stop it.

Iran’s moves are putting Trump in an increasingly tight corner. If he does not persuade the Iranians to reverse course, he will come under pressure from his hawkish advisers and Netanyahu to bomb their nuclear program, a dangerous adventure. But the only way to persuade them is to grant Iran sanctions relief, which Trump is clearly loath to do. The tension is also rising because Iran is now striking at U.S. interests across the region: six oil tankers hit by mysterious attacks just outside the Strait of Hormuz, an Iranian missile attack on the Golan Heights, confrontations in Gaza provoked by Palestinian Islamic Jihad, and Saudi oil fields struck by drones.

In May, Trump responded by dispatching a carrier strike group and bombers to the Gulf, but when it came to retaliating for the shooting down of a U.S. drone, he blinked. The Iranians

got the message: Trump likes to talk war, but he doesn't like to wage it. They understood that he prefers making deals. So they cleverly offered to start negotiations. Sensing another made-for-television summit, Trump jumped at the offer and invited Iranian President Hassan Rouhani to meet on the margins of the UN General Assembly in September, saying of the Iranian problem, "We could solve it in 24 hours."

The about-face alarmed Trump's partners, especially Netanyahu, who spoke out against it. The Saudis became more circumspect in responding to the September drone attack on their oil fields. The Emiratis wasted no time in hedging their bets, dispatching officials to Tehran to resume long-stalled maritime security talks. For Trump's Middle Eastern partners, a meeting between the impulsive and unpredictable U.S. president and the cool, professional Iranian president was their worst nightmare.

Almost three years into his term, Trump has nothing to show for his efforts to counter Iran or promote peace in the Middle East. Instead, his policies have fueled the conflict between Iran and Israel, alienated the Palestinians, supported an unending war and a humanitarian crisis in Yemen, and split the Gulf Cooperation Council, possibly permanently.

There is another path the United States could take in the region, an approach far more conducive to the interests of Washington and all its allies and partners. It would require stepping up U.S. diplomacy and scaling back U.S. objectives to what can plausibly be accomplished with the means available. Contain Iran rather than try to roll back

its gains or topple its regime. Maintain the residual U.S. troop presence in Iraq and Syria. Get back to the JCPOA and build on it to address other problematic Iranian behavior, using measured sanctions relief as leverage. Resolve the dispute in the Gulf Cooperation Council and engage all the relevant parties to try to end the conflict in Yemen. Return to the pursuit of an equitable resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, where prospects for a breakthrough may be low but engagement is necessary to preserve the hope of a two-state solution down the road. Treat Israel and Saudi Arabia as crucial regional partners but not subcontractors free to do whatever they want. And instead of spurning international consensus, try to shape it to align with U.S. interests.

This alternative path might eventually lead to a successful renovation of the grand project Kissinger began half a century ago. But if the United States continues to follow Trump's folly instead, it should not be surprised to find itself alone in the desert, chasing a mirage. 🌵

# The Dream Palace of the Americans

## Why Ceding Land Will Not Bring Peace

*Michael S. Doran*

**T**he Trump administration's Middle East policies have been roundly attacked by the U.S. foreign policy establishment. There are various lines of criticism, including ones concerning its approaches to Egypt, Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Syria, but the administration's gravest sin is generally held to be its support for Israel. By moving the U.S. embassy to Jerusalem, blessing Israel's annexation of the Golan Heights, and other gestures, the Trump team is said to have overturned half a century of settled U.S. policy, abandoned the Palestinians, and killed the two-state solution.

These are serious charges. But on close inspection, they turn out to say more about the hysteria of the prosecutors than the guilt of the defendant. Some of President Donald Trump's policies are new, some are not, and it is too early to see much impact. So why all the hue and cry? Because the administration openly insists on playing power politics rather than trying to move the world beyond them. Trump's

**MICHAEL S. DORAN** is a Senior Fellow at the Hudson Institute. From 2005 to 2007, he served as Senior Director for the Near East and North Africa at the National Security Council and as U.S. Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense.

real crime is challenging people's illusions—and that is an unforgivable offense.

### THE ROAD TO 242

Israel's conflict with the Arabs has long functioned as a screen onto which outsiders project their own psychodramas. Actual Middle East politics, meanwhile, churns on relentlessly, following the same laws of political physics as politics everywhere else: the strong do what they can, and the weak suffer what they must.

The United States entered the regional geopolitical game in earnest during World War II, drawn in by the strategic importance of the oil recently discovered under the Arabian Desert and elsewhere. With postwar power came regional responsibility, however, and Washington eventually had to decide how to deal with the messy residue of the British mandate for Palestine.

In 1948, U.S. President Harry Truman came under domestic political pressure to recognize a soon-to-be independent Israel. The foreign policy establishment opposed the move, arguing that U.S. support for Zionism would alienate the Arab states and drive them into the arms of the Soviet Union. Many of the voices making these arguments were diplomats and experts with deep ties to the Arab world and little sympathy for Jews, however, and Truman was not persuaded by their analysis, so he went ahead and recognized Israel anyway. The establishment considered it a major blot on his record—a gross mistake driven by the intrusion of amateur domestic politics into professional foreign policy.

With the British gone from Palestine, the Arabs attacked, and when the dust cleared, Israel had not just been granted



independence by others but won it on the battlefield. This demonstration of strength did not change any official minds, however, and the Arabist camp continued to see the United States' commitment to Israel as a strategic liability—a sentimental luxury that interfered with serious policy. In 1956, Egypt lost a second war to Israel, which was joined in the fighting by France and the United Kingdom, and the Israelis captured the Sinai Peninsula. Reluctant to be identified with either Zionism or imperialism, the administration of U.S. President Dwight Eisenhower hastily stepped in to force its European allies to back down and Israel to withdraw, quickly and nearly unconditionally. For Eisenhower, at least, the decision was business, not personal. He was trying to fight a regional and global Cold War, and the oil-rich Arabs had a lot to offer. Weak little Israel, in contrast, had to take one for the team.

A decade later, things heated up again. Moscow encouraged the Egyptian leader Gamal Abdel Nasser to start a crisis with Israel, as explained in a CIA summary of intelligence from a Soviet official, “to create another trouble spot for the United States in addition to that already existing in Vietnam.” Moscow even passed him fake intelligence claiming that Israel was massing troops on its northern border in preparation for an attack against Syria. Nasser quickly learned the intelligence was false but decided to act on it anyway, choosing to see Moscow's move as an invitation to heat up Israel's southern border in the name of Arab solidarity.

So in 1967, purporting to come to Syria's aid, Nasser expelled the UN peacekeepers separating the former

belligerents, placed the Egyptian military on high alert, moved troops into the Sinai, cut off Israel's maritime access to Asia, and linked up with the militaries of Jordan and Syria. Israel responded with a preemptive strike against its enemies and gained another victory, a lightning triumph that left it in control of territories captured from all three: Egypt (the Sinai and Gaza), Jordan (Jerusalem and the West Bank), and Syria (the Golan Heights).

U.S. President Lyndon Johnson now faced the same dilemma as Eisenhower: Should he let Israel keep what it had won? Some officials might have pined for the traditional policy of appeasing the Arabs at Israel's expense, but the case was increasingly hard to make. Israel had now won three straight wars against its supposedly stronger Arab opponents, the last one a blowout. The defeat of powerful Soviet proxies by an underdog American proxy had embarrassed the Soviet Union and boosted the United States' regional standing along with Israel's. Egypt and its Soviet patron had been recklessly provocative, and Israel had made them pay for it, dearly. Stepping in once again to punish the victor and reward the vanquished was unthinkable.

Yet if forcing Israel to disgorge the conquered territories was not an option, neither was allowing it to annex them outright, which appeared to risk provoking yet another war. So the Johnson administration chose a third course, turning the crisis into an opportunity by linking the settlement of this particular war with the broader regional conflict.

Its plan was sensible: the Arab combatants would get back much of the territory they had lost, but only in



*From his lips to God's ears: Trump at the Western Wall, May 2017*

return for recognizing Israel within secure boundaries and ending the violence. After months of talks, U.S. negotiators convinced the Soviets to accept something close, and the result became the famous formula enshrined in UN Security Council Resolution 242, a call for the “withdrawal of Israeli armed forces from territories occupied in the recent conflict.”

The wording was deliberately ambiguous. The Arab states later insisted that the sentence meant that Israel must immediately withdraw from “all of the” territories occupied, but the Americans had taken pains to ensure that the official text read only “from territories.” The United States had demanded language that clearly supported its policy: bilateral negotiations between Israel and each of the belligerent states would

determine the extent of Israel’s withdrawal. In the meantime, Israel would retain and administer the territories.

#### **ENTER KISSINGER**

At this point, eager to turn its attention back to Vietnam and the home front, the Johnson administration delegated matters to the Swedish diplomat Gunnar Jarring, serving as the UN special representative for negotiating a deal. Unfortunately, the talks quickly broke down over the irreconcilable interpretations of Resolution 242. The United States and Israel called for direct negotiations between the belligerents over the terms of a settlement, while the Soviet Union and its Arab allies insisted on an Israeli commitment to full withdrawal as a precondition for

any talks—even as Moscow scrambled to rebuild the Egyptian military. A newly emboldened Nasser soon challenged Israel along the Suez Canal, the Israelis retaliated with airstrikes, and skirmishing escalated into what is now referred to as the War of Attrition.

Watching Israel more than hold its own, U.S. President Richard Nixon and his national security adviser, Henry Kissinger, decided that the Jewish state had earned respect as an ally and eventually built Israel's new strength into the administration's strategizing. Kissinger saw Israeli power as a tool for changing the geopolitical map, a lever that could flip Egypt, then the most powerful Arab state, from the Soviet camp to the U.S. one. To regain its lost territory and reopen the Suez Canal, he reasoned, Egypt had to negotiate directly with Israel. The Soviets could help Cairo make war, but only the United States could help it make peace. Washington could deliver the Israelis and broker a lasting settlement—but only if Egyptian President Anwar al-Sadat would abandon Moscow.

After yet another major war in 1973, the strategy worked. The Sinai Interim Agreement, signed by Egypt and Israel in 1975, included a withdrawal of Israeli forces from land bordering the Suez Canal—the recent grand reopening of which had included, at Sadat's insistence, an American warship. The “interim” part of the deal was a pledge by both sides to negotiate a final peace deal without resort to war. It laid the groundwork for the historic peace between Egypt and Israel that would eventually be signed at Camp David in 1978.

Had U.S. President Gerald Ford defeated his Democratic challenger, Jimmy Carter, in 1976, Kissinger would

surely have been the one to seal the deal. He would have been regarded as a diplomatic wizard: ending the Egyptian-Israeli conflict while simultaneously bringing Egypt into the Western bloc. As it turned out, however, it was the Carter administration that brokered the Camp David accords, and that fact greatly influenced the lessons that subsequent generations learned from the triumph.

Getting the parties to commit to a final settlement was a huge diplomatic accomplishment that required single-minded presidential focus and enormous reserves of patience and tenacity, for all of which Carter deserves immense credit. In the process of finishing what Kissinger started, however, he embedded his own ideas about the region's true problems and solutions into the U.S. position—ideas that were less accurate than Kissinger's but would end up sanctified as gospel because they coincided with the success of the earlier, more hard-bitten strategy.

## **ENTER CARTER**

Carter and his team were contemptuous of the diplomacy that had led to the Sinai Interim Agreement. They believed it was necessary to solve the entire Arab-Israeli conflict all at once, in a single, grand, multilateral forum. It was Kissinger who had first convened such a conference in Geneva back in 1973, but purely in order to raise an international umbrella over his personal diplomacy. Carter wanted to reconvene the Geneva conference, this time for real, with the Soviets playing the role of true partners.

The underlying problem in the Middle East, Carter passionately believed, was the Israeli suppression of

**Tatek Woldegebriel Yimer, F18**

Head of Sub Office,  
United Nations World Food  
Programme in South Sudan



**Mohamad Al-Arif, F18**

Special Advisor, Ministry of  
Finance, Indonesia



**Oxana Paduraru, F18**

First Secretary, Embassy of  
the Republic of Moldova to  
the United States of America



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Deputy Director,  
Singapore Police Force



**Jasmine Huggins, F18**

Ambassador of Saint  
Christopher and Nevis  
to the Republic of China  
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Palestinian nationalism. He was certain that if Israel could be compelled to give back the occupied territories, the Arab states would make peace—even Syria. So his administration turned Kissinger's Bismarckian balancing into a driven quest for a comprehensive peace, one in which the Arab states bordering Israel would negotiate a lasting settlement in return for Israel's withdrawal to its pre-1967 borders and the creation of a Palestinian homeland.

This policy put all the local parties into an awkward situation. Whatever they loudly proclaimed, the Arab states had little interest in the Palestinians. Washington's embrace of the Palestinian cause gave them some leverage against Israel, but it also threatened to derail progress on important bilateral concerns. Sadat's two goals in coming to the negotiating table, for example, had been to reclaim the Sinai and join the American camp. Now Carter, hung up on the Palestinians, was bringing the Soviets into the talks as equals and wanted to add Syria and the Palestine Liberation Organization to boot—nothing that would advance Sadat's agenda. So the Egyptian leader stole a march and reshaped the diplomatic landscape. On November 19, 1977, he became the first Arab leader to visit Israel, delivering his message of "no more war, no more bloodshed" directly to the Knesset.

Carter felt blindsided, and he was angry that his dream of a comprehensive peace was receding. He eventually turned his attention back to the bilateral Egyptian-Israeli negotiations. But he chafed at the effort. And although the administration scrapped plans for a new Geneva conference, it never changed its mindset. Even as they supported the

Egyptian-Israeli track, U.S. negotiators pined for a comprehensive peace and a full Israeli withdrawal from the West Bank and Gaza. Carter's national security adviser, Zbigniew Brzezinski, called it a "concentric circles approach." The idea, he explained in his memoirs, was to begin working for "the Egyptian-Israeli accord, then expanding the circle by including the Palestinians on the West Bank and Gaza as well as the Jordanians, and finally moving to a still wider circle by engaging the Syrians and perhaps even the Soviets in a comprehensive settlement."

The Carter team built the concentric circles concept into the Camp David accords, which contained both a bilateral Egyptian-Israeli agreement and the "Framework for Peace in the Middle East." This second document called for "the resolution of the Palestinian problem in all its aspects" and "full autonomy" for the inhabitants of the West Bank and Gaza, with the establishment of "a self-governing authority" that would then participate in final-status negotiations. Thus was born the peace process that would continue forward for decades, all the way to Oslo and beyond. Imprinted in its very DNA was a utopian impulse to settle all the conflict in the Middle East by starting with the Palestinian question.

The Carter administration believed that the "Framework for Peace" was a crucial part of the overall plan, providing political cover to the Egyptians for making peace with Israel. Sadat played along with the "comprehensive settlement" game so long as he needed the Americans to pressure Israel to return the Sinai to Egypt, but once he got that, he displayed little interest in the

Palestinian issue. And a close reading of the Carter administration's internal documents shows that it was the Americans, not the Egyptians, who were obsessed with the "Framework for Peace," none more so than the president himself. When Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin fought him on granting the Palestinians autonomy and refused to commit to a freeze on Israeli settlements in the territories, the president became livid. Because Carter had much grander ambitions than Kissinger, the successful completion of an Egyptian-Israeli settlement left him deeply frustrated—to him it was a glass half empty rather than half full. He blamed Begin for the failure on the Palestinian track and never forgave him. When Begin and Sadat received the Nobel Peace Prize, Carter wrote in his diary, "I sent Begin and Sadat a congratulatory message after they received the Nobel Peace Prize jointly. Sadat deserved it; Begin did not."

### **THE RISE AND FALL OF THE PEACE PROCESS**

The peace process languished during the 1980s, as U.S. President Ronald Reagan cared more about East-West issues than Arab-Israeli ones and his administration was divided between the Israel-as-liability and Israel-as-asset camps, frustrating bold initiatives. A year after Camp David, moreover, the Iranian Revolution upended regional politics, shifting the geostrategic center of gravity (along with attention and resources) eastward to the Persian Gulf. But the George H. W. Bush administration came into office favoring the Carter administration's goal of a comprehensive peace, and in 1991, it

found a uniquely promising opportunity to reach for it.

By this point, the Soviet Union was on the brink of collapse, Iraq had been roundly defeated in the Gulf War, Iran was still recovering from its eight-year slugfest with Iraq, and Syria and the Palestine Liberation Organization were weak and broke. With all the rejectionist spoilers of previous peace efforts hors de combat, the road was clear to pursue a regional settlement on U.S. terms. The effort began with the Bush administration's 1991 Madrid conference, continued with the Clinton administration and the Oslo accords of 1993 and 1995, and for a few years really seemed to be getting somewhere: a temporary deal between Israel and the Palestinians, an Israeli-Jordanian treaty, tantalizing prospects of success on the Syrian track. As so often in the 1990s, a beautiful future seemed just around the corner.

And then things ground to a halt. In 1995, trying to derail the process, an Israeli right-wing extremist assassinated Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin. Negotiations bogged down as neither side made deep enough concessions to satisfy the other's concerns. And then, in 2000, the Palestinians turned back to violence. The second intifada's grisly campaign of terrorist attacks directed against cafés, pizza parlors, discotheques, and other civilian gathering places killed over 1,000 Israelis and injured many thousands more, leaving deep scars in Israel's national psyche. The median Israeli voter became convinced that ceding land to the Palestinians brought conflict rather than peace, and unsatisfying withdrawals from Lebanon in 2000 and Gaza in 2005 only reinforced the feeling.

In retrospect, the ultimate failure of the Oslo process should not have been surprising. The successes of the peace process have come not from Carteresque dreams but from Kissingerian realpolitik. Egypt made a private side deal with Israel in the 1970s, and Jordan did so in the 1990s, but both were hardheaded, materialistic transactions: Egypt made peace to get back the Sinai and a place within the American system, and Jordan did it to keep its place in that system and insulate itself from the vicissitudes of the peace process. Both sought to extricate themselves from the Palestinian problem, not solve it.

Since 1994, the main parties without a deal have been the Palestinians and the Syrians, and it is difficult to say whether they were ever serious about making peace. They certainly convinced their U.S. interlocutors that they were, and they parlayed that success into decades of continued power, status, and international largess. And yet somehow the final settlement was always six months away—and always would be. Thus did the Palestinian leader Yasir Arafat start the 1990s exiled in Tunis yet end them as a king in Ramallah. And thus did the Assad dynasty in Syria survive down the decades.

When the peaceful democratic revolutions of the Arab Spring broke out in late 2010, the Assad regime came under fire just as its counterparts elsewhere did. But instead of increasing pressure on the Syrian dictator, Washington cut Bashar al-Assad a lot of slack. Why? In part because he yet again dangled before them visions of the elusive Israeli-Syrian peace. As Frederic Hof, the official then handling Syria policy at the U.S. State Department, would later write,

“Assad told me in late February 2011 that he would sever all anti-Israel relationships with Iran, Hezbollah and Hamas and abstain from all behavior posing threats to the State of Israel, provided all land lost by Syria to Israel in the 1967 war—all of it—was returned.”

### FACING FACTS

For 70 years now, many American (and European) policymakers have seen it as their mission to stabilize the Middle East by constraining Israel's power and getting the country to give back at the negotiating table what it has taken on the battlefield. Over the decades, however, Israel has grown ever stronger and more able to resist such impositions. It has become a modern industrial power center, with a thriving economy and a fearsome military backed by nuclear weapons—even as the Palestinians have remained impoverished wards of the international community, with threats of terror their chief negotiating tool. Most Arab states moved on long ago. They now treat Israel as a normal player in the eternal great game of regional power balancing. So now has the Trump administration. And for that, it has been excoriated.

The administration's approach is a disaster, critics say, because it concedes so much to Israel upfront that the Palestinians will never agree to negotiate. The critics are correct about the unlikely prospects for a deal anytime soon. But that makes the Trump administration different from its predecessors how? U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry squandered more than a year of the Obama administration trying in vain to jump-start peace talks, a quixotic effort that even his own negotiators

knew would not succeed. Is that the benchmark against which Trump is to be judged? If so, he will end up failing a lot more cheaply.

The awkward truth that Washington is only gradually beginning to admit to itself is that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict will not, in fact, be solved with a two-state solution. It might once have been, and phalanxes of negotiators over half a century tried everything they could to bring it off. But the local parties to the conflict were never quite ready. The moment never got seized, and somewhere along the way the opportunity passed.

During the Israeli election campaign in September, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu announced his intention “to apply Israeli sovereignty over the Jordan Valley and the area of the northern Dead Sea upon the establishment of the next government.” To the ears of a U.S. diplomatic establishment raised on dreams of Oslo, this sounded like the ravings of a right-wing extremist. But even Netanyahu’s centrist rivals call for the retention of the Jordan Valley, a united Jerusalem, and Israeli control of major settlement blocs.

It is not obvious how the United States should deal with this new reality, and the Trump administration’s plans for solving the problem are no more likely to succeed than those of its predecessors. But give the president his due. He looks at the Middle East like any other region, and respects power. Without the ideological blinders of the professional peace processors, he has recognized that the Palestinian issue is not a major U.S. strategic concern and has essentially delegated its handling to the local parties directly involved. He can see that Israel,

having conquered the staging areas its enemies regularly used to attack it, will never give all of them back. Observing an emerging regional tripolarity, he has pulled two of the poles, Israel and Saudi Arabia, into a de facto alliance to contain the menacing third pole, Iran. In short, he seems to be embracing an updated version of the “twin pillars” Middle East policy that Washington adopted in the 1970s, with Israel taking Iran’s place as the second pillar.

This may advance U.S. interests effectively in the long run, and it may not. But the idea that the administration’s approach is a travesty of professional diplomacy by a bunch of bumbling amateurs is just a story that veterans of lost wars tell to comfort themselves. 🌐



# There Will Be a One-State Solution

## But What Kind of State Will It Be?

*Yousef Munayyer*

For nearly three decades, the so-called two-state solution has dominated discussions of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. But the idea of two states for two peoples in the territory both occupy was always an illusion, and in recent years, reality has set in. The two-state solution is dead. And good riddance: it never offered a realistic path forward. The time has come for all interested parties to instead consider the only alternative with any chance of delivering lasting peace: equal rights for Israelis and Palestinians in a single shared state.

It has been possible to see this moment coming for quite a while. As he tried to rescue what had become known as “the peace process,” U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry told Congress that the two-state solution had one to two years left before it would no longer be viable. That was six years ago. Resolution 2334, which the UN Security Council passed with U.S. consent in late 2016, called for “salvaging the two-state solution” by demanding a number of steps, including an immediate

end to Israeli settlement building in the occupied territories. That was three years ago. And since then, Israel has continued to build and expand settlements.

The arrival of U.S. President Donald Trump in the White House put the final nail in the coffin. “I am looking at two-state, and one-state, and I like the one that both parties like,” Trump explained in February 2017. Policy wonks and seasoned diplomats rolled their eyes at the reality-TV celebrity turned commander in chief describing the options as if they were dishes on a buffet table. But the remark indicated a genuine shift: since the current phase of the peace process began in the early 1990s, no U.S. president had ever before publicly suggested accepting a single state. What Trump had in mind has become clear in the years that have followed, as he and his team have approved a right-wing Israeli wish list aimed at a one-state outcome—but one that will enshrine Israeli dominance over Palestinian subjects, not one that will grant the parties equal rights.

Under Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, Israel has abandoned any pretense of seeking a two-state solution, and public support for the concept among Israelis has steadily dwindled. Palestinian leaders continue to seek a separate state. But after years of failure and frustration, most Palestinians no longer see that path as viable.

The simple truth is that over the decades, the Israelis developed enough power and cultivated enough support from Washington to allow them to occupy and hold the territories and to create, in effect, a one-state reality of their own devising. Netanyahu and Trump are seeking not to change the

**YOUSSEF MUNAYYER** is a writer and scholar who serves as Executive Director of the U.S. Campaign for Palestinian Rights. The views expressed here are his own.



*Waiting for a state: Palestinians at a checkpoint in Bethlehem, August 2010*

status quo but merely to ratify it. The question, then, is not whether there will be a single state but what kind of state it should be. Will it be one that cements de facto apartheid in which Palestinians are denied basic rights? Or will it be a state that recognizes Israelis and Palestinians as equals under the law? The latter is the goal that Palestinians should adopt. The Americans and the Israelis should also embrace it. But first they must realize that the status quo will eventually prove unsustainable and that partitioning the land will never work—and that the only moral path forward is to recognize the full humanity of both peoples.

#### **FACTS ON THE GROUND**

Between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean Sea live approximately 13 million people, all under the control of the Israeli state. Roughly half of them are Palestinian Arabs, some three million of whom live under a military

occupation with no right to vote for the government that rules them and around two million of whom live in Israel as second-class citizens, discriminated against based on their identity, owing to Israel's status as a Jewish state. Two million more Palestinians live in the besieged Gaza Strip, where the militant group Hamas exercises local rule: an open-air prison walled off from the world by an Israeli blockade.

Meanwhile, between 500,000 and 700,000 Jewish Israeli settlers live among millions of Palestinians in the occupied West Bank. Protecting the settlers and increasing their numbers have been chief priorities for Israel ever since it captured territories from the Arab states it defeated in the Six-Day War of 1967. In 1993, the Oslo accords started a new phase of the relationship, based on a quid pro quo: Israel would withdraw from parts of the occupied territories and abandon some settlements in return for an end to Palestinian

resistance and the normalization of relations with Israel's Arab neighbors.

But a vast settlement-building project never sat easily with that goal and created strong political incentives to avoid it. Today, large numbers of Israelis support keeping much of the occupied territories forever. A week before the Israeli election in September, Netanyahu delivered a televised address announcing his intention to annex the Jordan Valley and every Israeli settlement in the West Bank—a move that would eat up 60 percent of the West Bank and leave the other 40 percent as isolated cantons, unconnected to one another.

What was remarkable about Netanyahu's announcement was that it was so unremarkable: among Jewish Israelis, annexation is not a controversial idea. A recent poll showed that 48 percent of them support steps along the lines of what Netanyahu proposed; only 28 percent oppose them. Even Netanyahu's main rival, the centrist Blue and White alliance, supports perpetual Israeli control of the Jordan Valley. Its leaders' response to Netanyahu's annexation plan was to complain that it had been their idea first.

This state of affairs should not come as a surprise to anyone, especially policymakers in Washington. In fact, one national intelligence estimate drawn up by U.S. agencies judged that if Israel continued the occupation and settlement building for "an extended period, say two to three years, it will find it increasingly difficult to relinquish control." Pressure to hold on to the territories "would grow, and it would be harder to turn back to the Arabs land which contained such settlements." That estimate was written more than 50 years ago, mere months after the

Israeli occupation of the West Bank began. Nevertheless, Israel has forged ahead with its expansion and has enjoyed unflinching U.S. support, even as Israeli officials periodically warned about its irreversibility.

Palestinian leaders also made decisions that reduced the chances for a workable partition—none more significant than agreeing to the Oslo framework in the first place. In doing so, they consented to a formula that encouraged Israel's expansion, relinquished their ability to challenge it, and sidelined the international community and international law. Under Oslo, the Palestinians have had to rely on the United States to treat Israel with a kind of tough love that American leaders, nervous about their domestic support, have never been able to muster. In the 26 years between the 1967 war and the signing of the Oslo accords in 1993, the population of Israeli settlers (not including those in occupied Jerusalem) grew to around 100,000. In the 26 years since then, it has reached roughly 400,000.

As the failure of the peace process became clearer over time, Palestinians rose up against the occupation—sometimes violently. Israel pointed to those reactions to justify further repression. But the cycle was enabled by Palestinian leaders who resigned themselves to having to prove to Israel's satisfaction that Palestinians were worthy of self-determination—something to which all peoples are in fact entitled.

## **CONQUER AND DIVIDE**

Arguments about the conflict often devolve into shouting matches about who bears more of the blame for the failure of the two-state solution. But

such disputes miss the point: any plan that saw partition as a means to a just solution was always doomed to fail.

The belief in the viability of a two-state solution has depended on a flawed assumption that the conflict was rooted in the aftermath of the 1967 war. Peace through partition would be possible, advocates argued, if only the two sides could break the violent cycle of occupation and resistance that took hold after the war. Yet the dilemmas posed by partition long predate 1967 and stem from a fundamentally insoluble problem. For the better part of a century, Western powers—first the United Kingdom and then the United States—have repeatedly tried to square the same circle: accommodating the Zionist demand for a Jewish-majority state in a land populated overwhelmingly by Palestinians. This illogical project was made possible by a willingness to dismiss the humanity and rights of the Palestinian population and by sympathy for the idea of creating a space for Jews somewhere outside Europe—a sentiment that was sometimes rooted in an anti-Semitic wish to reduce the number of Jews in the Christian-dominated West.

In 1917, the British government issued the Balfour Declaration, outlining the goal of creating a “national home” in Palestine for the Jewish people without infringing on “the civil and religious rights of the existing non-Jewish” population. This formulation contained a fundamental flaw, one that would mar all future partition plans, as well: it conceived of the Jews as a people with national rights but did not grant the same status to the Palestinians. The Palestinian population could therefore

be moved around and dismembered, because they were not a people deserving of demographic cohesion. Twenty years later, the British Peel Commission proposed a partition plan that would have kept together the vast majority of the Jews in Palestine but would have split the Arab population into three separate political entities: one Arab, one Jewish, and one British. A decade after that, in the wake of the Holocaust, a UN partition plan presented a similar vision, with borders drawn to create a Jewish-majority state and with the Palestinians again divided into multiple entities.

In 1948, as British rule over Palestine came to an end, Zionist militias began to create a Jewish state on the ground by force, relying on the UN partition plan to legitimize their aims. In the war that followed, the majority of the land’s Palestinian inhabitants were forced out or fled ahead of Israeli incursions; they were never allowed to return. Their land was seized by the new state, their villages were razed, and their urban homes were given to Jewish newcomers. They became refugees, their lives thrown into limbo. Palestinians refer to this historical moment as the *nakba*—the “catastrophe.”

The 19 years that followed might be the only time in the past two millennia that the land of Palestine was actually divided. None of the great powers who had ruled over the territory—the Romans, the Byzantines, the Umayyads, the Abbasids, the Fatimids, the crusaders, the Ayyubids, the Mameluks, the Ottomans, the British—had ever divided Gaza from Jerusalem, Nablus from Nazareth, or Jericho from Jaffa. Doing so never made sense, and it still doesn’t. Indeed, when Israel took control of the territories in 1967, it



actually represented a return to a historical norm of ruling the land as a single unit. But it did so with two systems, one for Jewish Israelis and the other for the people living on the land that the Israelis had conquered.

### **ARAFAT'S ERROR**

What is the problem that the two-state solution seeks to solve? As the Oslo process has dragged on, the answer has become clear: not so much a conflict between Israelis and Palestinians but one among Israelis themselves. Israel likes to consider itself a democracy even as it rules over millions of subjects denied basic political rights. Endless negotiations have only obscured that fundamental fact. Actual progress in the talks would threaten Jewish control of the land, something that has proved more important to Israel than democracy. That is why the Israelis have favored Oslo-type negotiations, which make it appear they are earnestly trying to deal with the Palestinian issue but never force them to actually do so.

The Palestinian leadership, on the other hand, has devoted itself to the two-state solution, even though any state it could conceivably win through the existing negotiating process would fall far short of minimal Palestinian needs. Such a state would not allow Palestinian refugees to return to their ancestral towns and villages, or offer full equality to Palestinian citizens of Israel, or grant Palestinians genuine independence and sovereignty. Accepting a role in this misbegotten exercise was a giant strategic mistake, one driven less by the basic needs of Palestinian nationalism than the personal interests of Palestinian leaders.

Having led the armed struggle against Israel for decades, Yasir Arafat's Palestine Liberation Organization was known and accepted by ordinary Palestinians. By the late 1980s, however, the group had become a shell of its former self. Already isolated by its exile in Tunisia, the PLO became even weaker in 1990 after its wealthy patrons in the Gulf cut funding when Arafat backed Saddam Hussein's grab for Kuwait. On the ground in the territories, meanwhile, the first intifada—a grassroots revolt against the occupation—was making news and threatening to displace the PLO as the face of Palestinian resistance. By embracing the Oslo process, Arafat and his fellow PLO leaders found a personal path back to influence and relevance—while trapping the Palestinian community in a bind that has held them back ever since.

The PLO's decision was all the more regrettable considering the global context in which it was made. The Soviet Union had just collapsed, fueling a global wave of democratization. South Africa was dismantling apartheid, demonstrating that a country could willingly abandon a system of racist oppression in favor of democracy. The PLO could not have asked for a more favorable moment in which to demand equal rights in a democratic state. Instead, the leaders of the PLO grasped at immediate relevance and allowed Palestinians' fundamental rights to be the subject of three-way negotiations in which they would always be the weakest party.

### **TIME TO MOVE ON**

The PLO's choice condemned the Palestinians to still more oppression under military occupation and misery in refugee camps as they waited for a mythical deal. Decades later, even after everybody else

has moved on, Arafat's successors in the Palestinian Authority still cling to the peace process and the two-state solution. Having sunk so much effort and credibility into their state-building project, they are having difficulty letting go.

This accommodation should stop. The time has come for the Palestinian Authority to abandon its advocacy of a two-state solution, an idea that has become little more than a fig leaf for the United States and other great powers to hide behind while they allow Israel to proceed with *de facto* apartheid. Instead, Palestinians should acknowledge the reality that there is and always will be only one state between the river and the sea and focus their efforts on making that state a viable home for all of the territory's inhabitants, Jews and Arabs alike.

Some will object that such a shift in strategy would undercut the hard-won consensus, rooted in decades of activism and international law, that the Palestinians have a right to their own state. That consensus, however, has produced little for the Palestinians. Countless UN resolutions have failed to stop Israeli settlements or gain Palestinians a state, so they wouldn't be losing much. And in a one-state solution worthy of the name, Palestinians would win full equality under the law, so they would be gaining a great deal.

The Trump administration will not embrace the concept of equal rights for all inhabitants, including the Palestinians. But American voters might. A poll conducted last year by the University of Maryland found that Americans were roughly evenly split between supporting a two-state solution and supporting a one-state solution with equal rights for all inhabitants. Yet when asked what they preferred if a two-state solution were

not possible (which it isn't), the status quo or one state with equal rights, they chose the latter by a two-to-one margin.

The United States has been able to secure what it desires most in the Middle East—the steady flow of natural resources—without a just peace. But that has come at the price of perpetual instability. A shared state with equal rights for all would serve U.S. interests even better, because it would finally stabilize the region and generate broader opportunities for economic growth and political reform.

Israelis would benefit from a shift to such a state, as well. They, too, would gain security, stability, and growth, while also escaping international isolation and reversing the moral rot that the occupation has produced in Israeli society. At the same time, they would maintain connections to historical and religious sites in the West Bank. Most Israelis would far prefer to perpetuate the status quo. But that is just not possible. Israel cannot continue to deny the rights of millions of Palestinians indefinitely and expect to remain a normal member of the international community. The Middle Eastern version of apartheid will eventually be recognized for what it is, and then Israel's true options will be clear: move to one state with equal rights or become a pariah.

## **A NEW CONSTITUTION**

Advocates of equal rights for all must take steps to make sure that "one-state solution" does not become as empty a slogan as "two-state solution." To focus and ground their vision, they should therefore propose not only a new state but also a new constitution. That would both demonstrate their commitment to democracy and highlight Israel's lack of the

same. When the country was founded in 1948, Zionist leaders were trying to expedite the arrival of more Jews, prevent the return of Palestinians, and seize as much land as possible. They had no interest in defining citizenship criteria, rights, or constraints on government power. So instead of writing a constitution, the Jewish state instituted a series of “basic laws” in an ad hoc fashion, and these have acquired some constitutional weight over time.

In place of that legal patchwork, which has been used to protect the rights of some and to deny the rights of others, Israelis and Palestinians should work together to craft a constitution that would uphold the rights of all. The new constitution would recognize that the country would be home to both peoples and that, despite national narratives and voices on either side that claim otherwise, both peoples have historical ties to the land. It would acknowledge the Jewish people’s history of being persecuted and the paramount importance of ensuring that all citizens, regardless of religion, ethnicity, or national origin, have a right to safety and security. And it would also recognize the wrongs done to Palestinian refugees and begin a process to repatriate and compensate them.

A new constitution could offer citizenship to all the people currently living in the land between the river and the sea and to Palestinian refugees and would create pathways for immigrants from elsewhere to become citizens. All citizens would enjoy full civil and political rights, including the freedom of movement, religion, speech, and association. And all would be equal before the law: the state would be forbidden from discriminating on the basis of ethnicity or religion.

In order for such a state to function, those constitutional principles would have to be considered foundational, and they would be subject to a very high bar for amendment—say, a requirement of at least 90 percent approval in the legislative branch. This would ensure that basic rights could not be altered by means of a simple majority and would prohibit any one group from using a demographic advantage to alter the nature of the state.

A transition to a new system with equal rights would require a kind of trust that cannot be built as long as victims of oppression, violence, and bloodshed over the decades feel that justice has not been done. So the new state would also need a truth-and-reconciliation process focused on restorative justice. For inspiration, it could look to past efforts in South Africa and Rwanda.

Some will dismiss this vision as naive or impractical. To them, I would ask: More naive and impractical than unscrambling the omelet that the Israeli occupation has created? How many more decades of failure must we endure before we can safely conclude that partition is a dead end? How many more people must we condemn to oppression, violence, and death?

The idea of equal rights for Israelis and Palestinians in a shared state has been around for decades, perhaps as long as have efforts to partition the land. But it has always been cast aside to accommodate the demands of Zionism, even at the expense of peace. Countless lives have been lost, and generations have had their rights denied, all while partition has become less and less realistic. Neither side can afford to go on this way. Now is the moment to adopt the only genuine way forward: equal rights for all. 🌍

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# The Unwanted Wars

## Why the Middle East Is More Combustible Than Ever

*Robert Malley*

**T**he war that now looms largest is a war nobody apparently wants. During his presidential campaign, Donald Trump railed against the United States' entanglement in Middle Eastern wars, and since assuming office, he has not changed his tune. Iran has no interest in a wide-ranging conflict that it knows it could not win. Israel is satisfied with calibrated operations in Iraq, Lebanon, Syria, and Gaza but fears a larger confrontation that could expose it to thousands of rockets. Saudi Arabia is determined to push back against Iran, but without confronting it militarily. Yet the conditions for an all-out war in the Middle East are riper than at any time in recent memory.

A conflict could break out in any one of a number of places for any one of a number of reasons. Consider the September 14 attack on Saudi oil facilities: it could theoretically have been perpetrated by the Houthis, a Yemeni rebel group, as part of their war with the kingdom; by

Iran, as a response to debilitating U.S. sanctions; or by an Iranian-backed Shiite militia in Iraq. If Washington decided to take military action against Tehran, this could in turn prompt Iranian retaliation against the United States' Gulf allies, an attack by Hezbollah on Israel, or a Shiite militia operation against U.S. personnel in Iraq. Likewise, Israeli operations against Iranian allies anywhere in the Middle East could trigger a regionwide chain reaction. Because any development anywhere in the region can have ripple effects everywhere, narrowly containing a crisis is fast becoming an exercise in futility.

When it comes to the Middle East, Tip O'Neill, the storied Democratic politician, had it backward: all politics—especially local politics—is international. In Yemen, a war pitting the Houthis, until not long ago a relatively unexceptional rebel group, against a debilitated central government in the region's poorest nation, one whose prior internal conflicts barely caught the world's notice, has become a focal point for the Iranian-Saudi rivalry. It has also become a possible trigger for deeper U.S. military involvement. The Syrian regime's repression of a popular uprising, far more brutal than prior crackdowns but hardly the first in the region's or even Syria's modern history, morphed into an international confrontation drawing in a dozen countries. It has resulted in the largest number of Russians ever killed by the United States and has thrust both Russia and Turkey and Iran and Israel to the brink of war. Internal strife in Libya sucked in not just Egypt, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) but also Russia and the United States.

There is a principal explanation for such risks. The Middle East has become

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**ROBERT MALLEY** is President and CEO of the International Crisis Group. During the Obama administration, he served as Special Assistant to the President, White House Middle East Coordinator, and Senior Adviser on countering the Islamic State.



*Rifles and rifts: Houthi rebels in Sanaa, Yemen, December 2018*

the world's most polarized region and, paradoxically, its most integrated. That combination—along with weak state structures, powerful nonstate actors, and multiple transitions occurring almost simultaneously—also makes the Middle East the world's most volatile region. It further means that as long as its regional posture remains as it is, the United States will be just one poorly timed or dangerously aimed Houthi drone strike, or one particularly effective Israeli operation against a Shiite militia, away from its next costly regional entanglement. Ultimately, the question is not chiefly whether the United States should disengage from the region. It is how it should choose to engage: diplomatically or militarily, by exacerbating divides or mitigating them, and by aligning itself fully with one side or seeking to achieve a sort of balance.

#### **ACT LOCALLY, THINK REGIONALLY**

The story of the contemporary Middle East is one of a succession of rifts, each new one sitting atop its precursors, some taking momentary precedence over

others, none ever truly or fully resolved. Today, the three most important rifts—between Israel and its foes, between Iran and Saudi Arabia, and between competing Sunni blocs—intersect in dangerous and potentially explosive ways.

Israel's current adversaries are chiefly represented by the so-called axis of resistance: Iran, Hezbollah, Hamas, and, although presently otherwise occupied, Syria. The struggle is playing out in the traditional arenas of the West Bank and Gaza but also in Syria, where Israel routinely strikes Iranian forces and Iranian-affiliated groups; in cyberspace; in Lebanon, where Israel faces the heavily armed, Iranian-backed Hezbollah; and even in Iraq, where Israel has reportedly begun to target Iranian allies. The absence of most Arab states from this frontline makes it less prominent but no less dangerous.

For those Arab states, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict has been nudged to the sidelines by the two other battles. Saudi Arabia prioritizes its rivalry with Iran. Both countries exploit the Shiite-Sunni rift to mobilize their respective

constituencies but are in reality moved by power politics, a tug of war for regional influence unfolding in Iraq, Lebanon, Syria, Yemen, and the Gulf states.

Finally, there is the Sunni-Sunni rift, with Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE vying with Qatar and Turkey. As Hussein Agha and I wrote in *The New Yorker* in March, this is the more momentous, if least covered, of the divides, with both supremacy over the Sunni world and the role of political Islam at stake. Whether in Egypt, Libya, Syria, Tunisia, or as far afield as Sudan, this competition will largely define the region's future.

Together with the region's polarization is a lack of effective communication, which makes things ever more perilous. There is no meaningful channel between Iran and Israel, no official one between Iran and Saudi Arabia, and little real diplomacy beyond rhetorical jousting between the rival Sunni blocs.

With these fault lines intersecting in complex ways, various groupings at times join forces and at other times compete. When it came to seeking to topple Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, Saudi Arabia and the UAE were on the same side as Qatar and Turkey, backing Syrian rebels—albeit different ones, reflecting their divergent views on the Islamists' proper role. But those states took opposite stances on Egypt, with Doha and Ankara investing heavily to shore up a Muslim Brotherhood-led government that Riyadh and Abu Dhabi were trying to help bring down (the government fell in 2013, to be replaced by the authoritarian rule of Abdel Fattah el-Sisi). Qatar and Turkey fear Iran but fear Saudi Arabia even more. Hamas stands with Syria in opposition to Israel but stood with the Syrian opposition and other Islamists against Assad. The

geometry of the Middle East's internal schisms may fluctuate, yet one struggles to think of another region whose dynamics are as thoroughly defined by a discrete number of identifiable and all-encompassing fault lines.

One also struggles to think of a region that is as integrated, which is the second source of its precarious status. This may strike many as odd. Economically, it ranks among the least integrated areas of the world; institutionally, the Arab League is less coherent than the European Union, less effective than the African Union, and more dysfunctional than the Organization of American States. Nor is there any regional entity to which Arab countries and the three most active non-Arab players (Iran, Israel, and Turkey) belong.

Yet in so many other ways, the Middle East functions as a unified space. Ideologies and movements spread across borders: in times past, Arabism and Nasserism; today, political Islam and jihadism. The Muslim Brotherhood has active branches in Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, the Palestinian territories, Syria, Turkey, the Gulf states, and North Africa. Jihadi movements such as al Qaeda and the Islamic State, or ISIS, espouse a transnational agenda that rejects the nation-state and national boundaries altogether. Iran's Shiite coreligionists are present in varying numbers in the Levant and the Gulf, often organized as armed militias that look to Tehran for inspiration or support. Saudi Arabia has sought to export Wahhabism, a puritanical strain of Islam, and funds politicians and movements across the region. Media outlets backed by one side or another of the Sunni-Sunni rift—Qatar's Al Jazeera, Saudi Arabia's Al Arabiya—have regional reach. The Palestinian cause, damaged as it may

now seem, still resonates across the region and can mobilize its citizens in a way that arguably has no equivalent worldwide. Even subnational movements, such as Kurdish nationalism, which spreads across four countries, promote transnational objectives.

Accordingly, local struggles quickly take on regional significance—and thus attract weapons, money, and political support from the outside. The Houthis may view their fight as being primarily about Yemen, Hezbollah may be focused on power and politics in Lebanon, Hamas may be a Palestinian movement advancing a Palestinian cause, and Syria's various opposition groups may be pursuing national goals. But in a region that is both polarized and integrated, those local drivers inevitably become subsumed by larger forces.

The fate of the Arab uprisings that began in late 2010 illustrates the dynamic well, with Tunisia, where it all began, being the lone exception. The toppling of the regime there happened too swiftly, too unexpectedly, and in a country that was too much on the margins of regional politics for other states to react in time. But they soon found their bearings. Every subsequent rebellion almost instantaneously became a regional and then international affair. In Egypt, the Muslim Brotherhood's fortunes and the future of political Islam were at stake, and so Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and the UAE dove in. The same was true in Libya, where Egypt, once Sisi had prevailed and the Brotherhood had been pushed out, joined the fray. Likewise for Syria, where the civil war drew in all three regional battles: Israel's confrontation with the "axis of resistance," the Iranian-Saudi struggle, and the intra-Sunni competition. A similar scenario has played out in Yemen, too.

## **STATES OF CHAOS**

Along with the Middle East's polarization and integration, its dysfunctional state structures present another risk factor. Some states are more akin to nonstate actors: the central governments in Libya, Syria, and Yemen lack control over large swaths of their territories and populations. Conversely, several nonstate actors operate as virtual states, including Hamas, the Houthis, the Kurds, and the Islamic State before it was toppled. And these nonstate actors often must contend with nonstate spoilers of their own: in Gaza, Hamas vies with jihadi groups that sometimes behave in ways that undermine its rule or contradict its goals. Even in more functional states, it is not always clear where the ultimate policymaking authority lies. Shiite militias in Iraq and Hezbollah in Lebanon, for example, engage in activities that their titular sovereigns don't control, let alone condone.

Weak states cohabiting with powerful nonstate actors creates the ideal circumstances for external interference. It's a two-way street—foreign states exploit armed groups to advance their interests, and armed groups turn to foreign states to promote their own causes—that is all too open to misinterpretation. Iran almost certainly helps the Houthis and Iraqi Shiite militias, but does it control them? The People's Protection Units, a movement of Kurdish fighters in Syria, are affiliated with the Kurdistan Workers' Party in Turkey, but do they follow its command?

The fact that nonstate actors operate as both proxies and independent players makes it hard to establish accountability for violence or deter it in the first place. Iran might wrongly assume that it will not be held responsible for a Houthi drone



attack on Saudi Arabia, a Palestinian Islamic Jihad attack on Israel, or an Iraqi Shiite militia strike on a U.S. target. Saudi Arabia might misguidedly blame Iran for every Houthi attack, just as Iran might blame Saudi Arabia for any violent incident on its soil perpetrated by internal dissident groups. The United States might be convinced that every Shiite militia is an Iranian proxy doing Tehran's bidding. Israel might deem Hamas accountable for every attack emanating from Gaza, Iran for every attack emanating from Syria, the Lebanese state for every attack launched by Hezbollah. In each of these instances, the price of misattribution could be high.

This is no mere thought exercise: After the attack on Saudi oil facilities in September, the Houthis immediately claimed responsibility, possibly in the hope of enhancing their stature. Iran, likely seeking to avoid U.S. retaliation, denied any involvement. Who conducted the operation and who—if anyone—is punished could have wide-ranging implications.

Even in seemingly well-structured states, the locus of decision-making has become opaque. In Iran, the government and the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, the branch of the military that answers directly to the country's supreme leader, at times seem to go their separate ways. Whether this reflects a conscious division of labor or an actual tug of war is a matter of debate, as is the question of who exactly pulls the strings.

### **THREAT MULTIPLIERS**

A series of global, regional, and local transitions has made these dynamics even more uncertain. The global transitions include a newly present China, a resurgent Russia, and a United States in

relative decline. There are also the aftershocks of the recent Arab uprisings, notably the dismantling of the regional order and the propagation of failed states. These are exacerbated by domestic political changes: a new, unusually assertive leadership in Saudi Arabia and a new, unusual leadership in the United States. All these developments fuel the sense of a region in which everything is up for grabs and in which opportunities not grabbed quickly will be lost for good.

The United States' key regional allies are simultaneously worried about the country's staying power, heartened by the policies of the Trump administration, and anxious about them. The president made it a priority to repair relations with Egypt, Israel, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE, all of which had frayed under his predecessor. But Trump's reluctance to use force has been equally clear, as has his willingness to betray long-standing allies in other parts of the world.

That combination of encouragement and concern helps explain, for example, Saudi Arabia's uncharacteristic risk-taking under the leadership of Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, or MBS: its continuing war in Yemen, its blockade of Qatar, its kidnapping of the Lebanese prime minister, its killing of the dissident Jamal Khashoggi. MBS perceives the current alignment with Washington as a fleeting opportunity—because Trump might not win reelection, because he is capable of an abrupt policy swing that could see him reach a deal with Iran, and because the United States has a long-standing desire to extricate itself from Middle Eastern entanglements. The feeling in Israel is similar. The United States' partners in the region are both seeking to take advantage of Trump's

tenure and hedging against one of his sudden pivots and the possibility of a one-term presidency, an attitude that makes the situation even more fluid and unpredictable.

Meanwhile, growing Chinese and Russian influence have given Iran some encouragement, but hardly real confidence. In the event of an escalation of tensions between Tehran and Washington, would Moscow stand with Iran or, hoping to benefit from regional disruption, stand on the sidelines? Will China ignore American threats of sanctions and buy Iranian oil or, in the wake of a potential trade deal with the United States, abide by Washington's demands? Uncertainty about American intentions could be even more dangerous. Iran senses Trump's distaste for war and is therefore tempted to push the envelope, pressuring Washington in the hope of securing some degree of sanctions relief. But because Tehran does not know where the line is, it runs the risk of going too far and paying the price.

## **TWO CAUTIONARY TALES**

To understand how these dynamics could interact in the future, it is instructive to look at how similar dynamics have interacted in the recent past, in Syria. Saudi Arabia and others seized on a homegrown effort to topple the Assad regime as an opportunity to change the regional balance of power. They banked on the opposition prevailing and thereby ending Damascus' longtime alliance with Tehran. Iran and Hezbollah, fearful of that outcome, poured resources into the fight on the regime's behalf, at huge human cost. Israel also stepped in, seeking to roll back Iran's growing presence at its borders. Qatar and Turkey

backed one set of Islamist-leaning rebel groups, and Saudi Arabia and its allies backed others. Russia—concerned about a shift in Syria's orientation and sensing American hesitation—saw a chance to reassert itself in the Middle East and also intervened, placing it directly at odds with the United States and, for a time, Turkey. And Turkey, alarmed at the prospect of U.S.-backed Kurdish forces enjoying a safe haven in northern Syria, intervened directly while also supporting Syrian Arab opposition groups that it hoped would fight the Kurds.

With Syria an arena for regional tensions, clashes there, even inadvertent ones, risk becoming flash points for larger confrontations. Turkey shot down one Russian fighter jet (Moscow blamed Israel for the downing of another), and U.S. forces killed hundreds of members of a private Russian paramilitary group in eastern Syria. Turkey has attacked U.S.-backed Kurds, raising the prospect of a U.S.-Turkish military collision. And Israel has struck Iranian or Iranian-linked targets in Syria hundreds of times.

Syria also illustrates why it is so difficult for the United States to circumscribe its involvement in Middle Eastern conflicts. During the Obama administration, Washington backed rebel groups fighting both the Assad regime and ISIS but claimed not to be pursuing regime change (despite supporting forces that wanted exactly that), not to be seeking a regional rebalance (despite the clear impact Assad's downfall would have on Iran's influence), not to be boosting Turkey's foes (despite supporting a Kurdish movement affiliated with Turkey's mortal enemy), and not to be seeking to weaken Russia (despite Moscow's affinity for Assad). But the United

States could not, of course, back rebel groups while distancing itself from their objectives, or claim purely local aims while everyone else involved saw the Syrian conflict in a broader context. Washington became a central player in a regional and international game that it purportedly wanted nothing to do with.

A similar scene has played out in Yemen. Since 2004, the north of the country had been the arena of recurring armed conflict between the Houthis and the central government. Government officials early on pointed to supposed Iranian financial and military aid to the rebels, just as Houthi leaders claimed Saudi interference. After the Houthis seized the capital and marched southward in 2014–15, Saudi Arabia—dreading the prospect of an Iranian-backed militia controlling its southern neighbor—responded. Its reaction was magnified by the rise of MBS, who was distrustful of the United States, determined to show Iran the days of old were over, and intent on making his mark at home. Faced with intense pushback, the Houthis increasingly turned to Iran for military assistance, and Iran, seeing a low-cost opportunity to enhance its influence and bog down Saudi Arabia, obliged. Washington, still in the midst of negotiations over a nuclear deal with Tehran, which Riyadh vehemently opposed, felt it could not afford to add another crisis to the brittle relations with its Gulf ally.

Despite its misgivings about the war, Washington thus threw its weight behind the Saudi-led coalition, sharing intelligence, providing weapons, and offering diplomatic support. As in Syria, the Obama administration looked to limit U.S. aims. It would help defend Saudi territorial integrity but not join Riyadh's

anti-Houthi fight or get sucked into an Iranian-Saudi battle. As in Syria, this effort largely was in vain. The United States could not cherry-pick one part of the war: if it was with Saudi Arabia, that meant it was against the Houthis, which meant it would be against Iran.

#### **WASHINGTON ADRIFT**

President Barack Obama's largely fruitless attempt to confine U.S. involvement in the region reveals something about the unavoidable linkages that bind various Middle Eastern conflicts together. It also reveals something about the choices now facing the United States. Obama (in whose administration I served) had in mind the United States' extrication from what he considered the broader Middle Eastern quagmire. He withdrew U.S. troops from Iraq, tried to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, expressed sympathy for Arab popular uprisings and for a time distanced himself from autocratic leaders, shunned direct military intervention in Syria, and pursued a deal with Iran to prevent its nuclear program from becoming a trigger for war. Libya doesn't fit this pattern, although even there he apparently labored under the belief that the 2011 NATO-led intervention could be tightly limited; that this assumption proved wrong only reinforced his initial desire to keep his distance from regional conflicts. His ultimate goal was to help the region find a more stable balance of power that would make it less dependent on direct U.S. interference or protection. Much to the Saudis' consternation, he spoke of Tehran and Riyadh needing to find a way to "share" the region.

But Obama was a gradualist; he was persuaded that the United States could neither abruptly nor radically shift gears

and imperil regional relationships that had been decades in the making. As he once put it to some of us working in the White House, conducting U.S. policy was akin to steering a large vessel: a course correction of a few degrees might not seem like much in the moment, but over time, the destination would differ drastically. What he did, he did in moderation. Thus, while seeking to persuade Riyadh to open channels with Tehran, he did so gently, carefully balancing continuity and change in the United States' Middle East policy. And although he wanted to avoid military entanglements, his presidency nonetheless was marked by several costly interventions: both direct, as in Libya, and indirect, as in Syria and Yemen.

In a sense, his administration was an experiment that got suspended halfway through. At least when it came to his approach to the Middle East, Obama's presidency was premised on the belief that someone else would pick up where he left off. It was premised on his being succeeded by someone like him, maybe a Hillary Clinton, but certainly not a Donald Trump.

Trump has opted for a very different course (perhaps driven in part by a simple desire to do the opposite of what his predecessor did). Instead of striving for some kind of balance, Trump has tilted entirely to one side: doubling down on support for Israel; wholly aligning himself with MBS, Sisi, and other leaders who felt spurned by Obama; withdrawing from the Iran nuclear deal and zealously joining up with the region's anti-Iranian axis. Indeed, seeking to weaken Iran, Washington has chosen to confront it on all fronts across much of the region: in the nuclear and economic realms; in Syria, where U.S. officials have explicitly tied the continued

U.S. presence to countering Iran; in Iraq, where the United States wants a fragile government that is now dependent on close ties to Tehran to cut those ties; in Yemen, where the administration, flouting Congress' will, has increased support for the Saudi-led coalition; and in Lebanon, where it has added to sanctions on Hezbollah.

Iran has also chosen to treat the region as its canvas. Besides chipping away at its own compliance with the nuclear deal, it has seized tankers in the Gulf; shot down a U.S. drone; and, if U.S. claims are to be believed, used Shiite militias to threaten Americans in Iraq, attacked commercial vessels in the Strait of Hormuz, and struck Saudi oil fields. In June of this year, when the drone came down and Trump contemplated military retaliation, Iran was quick to warn Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE that they would be fair game if they played any role in enabling a U.S. attack. (There is no reason to trust that the domino effect would have ended there; Iraq, Israel, Lebanon, and Syria could well have been drawn into the ensuing hostilities.) And in Yemen, the Houthis have intensified their attacks on Saudi targets, which may or may not be at Iran's instigation—although, at a minimum, it is almost certainly not over Tehran's objections. Houthi leaders with whom I recently spoke in Sanaa, Yemen's capital, denied acting at Iran's behest yet added that they would undoubtedly join forces with Iran in a war against Saudi Arabia if their own conflict with the kingdom were still ongoing. In short, the Trump administration's policies, which Washington claimed would moderate Iran's behavior and achieve a more stringent nuclear deal, have prompted Tehran to intensify its regional activities and ignore some of the existing nuclear



deal's restraints. This gets to the contradiction at the heart of the president's Middle East policies: they make likelier the very military confrontation he is determined to avoid.

### WHAT MATTERS NOW

A regional conflagration is far from inevitable; none of the parties wants one, and so far, all have for the most part shown the ability to calibrate their actions so as to avoid an escalation. But even finely tuned action can have unintentional, outsize repercussions given the regional dynamics. Another Iranian attack in the Gulf. An Israeli strike in Iraq or Syria that crosses an unclear Iranian redline. A Houthi missile that kills too many Saudis or an American, and a reply that, this time, aims at the assumed Iranian source. A Shiite militia that kills an American soldier in Iraq. An Iranian nuclear program that, now unshackled from the nuclear deal's constraints, exceeds Israel's or the United States' unidentified tolerance level. One can readily imagine how any of these incidents could spread across boundaries, each party searching for the arena in which its comparative advantage is greatest.

With such ongoing risks, the debate about the extent to which the United States should distance itself from the region and reduce its military footprint is important but somewhat beside the point. Should any of these scenarios unfold, the United States would almost certainly find itself dragged in, whether or not it had made the strategic choice of withdrawing from the Middle East.

The more consequential question, therefore, is what kind of Middle East the United States will remain engaged in or disengaged from. A polarized region with

intersecting rifts, where local disputes invariably take on broader significance, will remain at constant risk of combusting and therefore of implicating the United States in ways that will prove wasteful and debilitating. De-escalating tensions is not something the country can do on its own. Yet at a minimum, it can stop aggravating those tensions and, without abandoning or shunning them, avoid giving its partners carte blanche or enabling their more bellicose actions. That would mean ending its support for the war in Yemen and pressing its allies to bring the conflict to an end. It would mean shelving its efforts to wreck Iran's economy, rejoining the nuclear deal, and then negotiating a more comprehensive agreement. It would mean halting its punishing campaign against the Palestinians and considering new ways to end the Israeli occupation. In the case of Iraq, it would mean no longer forcing Baghdad to pick a side between Tehran and Washington. And as far as the Iranian-Saudi rivalry is concerned, the United States could encourage the two parties to work on modest confidence-building measures—on maritime security, environmental protection, nuclear safety, and transparency around military exercises—before moving on to the more ambitious task of establishing a new, inclusive regional architecture that would begin to address both countries' security concerns.

An administration intent on pursuing this course won't be starting from scratch. Recently, some Gulf states—the UAE chief among them—have taken tentative steps to reach out to Iran in an effort to reduce tensions. They saw the growing risks of the regional crisis spinning out of control and recognized its potential costs. Washington should, too, before it is too late. 🌐

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# The Middle East's Lost Decades

## Development, Dissent, and the Future of the Arab World

*Maha Yahya*

Since the 9/11 attacks, the Arab world's relative economic, social, and political underdevelopment has been a topic of near-constant international concern. In a landmark 2002 report, the UN Development Program (UNDP) concluded that Arab countries lagged behind much of the world in development indicators such as political freedom, scientific progress, and the rights of women. Under U.S. President George W. Bush, this analysis helped drive the "freedom agenda," which aimed to democratize the Middle East—by force if necessary—in order to eradicate the underdevelopment and authoritarianism that some officials in Washington believed were the root causes of terrorism. Bush's successor, Barack Obama, criticized one of the cornerstones of the freedom agenda—the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003—but he shared Bush's diagnosis. In his first major foreign policy speech as president, delivered in Cairo in 2009, Obama called on Middle Eastern governments to make progress in democracy, religious freedom, gender equality, and "economic development and opportunity." Implicit in his remarks was a

widely shared view among Western observers of the Middle East: that the Arab world's dysfunction was a product of social and political arrangements that thwarted human potential, furthered inequality, and favored a small elite to the detriment of the broader population.

During the first decade of this century, progress was slow. Under the surface, however, discontent was rising. This discontent culminated in the protests of 2010–11, commonly known as the Arab Spring. In countries as diverse as Egypt, Libya, Syria, and Tunisia, ordinary citizens took to the streets to challenge their authoritarian rulers and demand dignity, equality, and social justice. For a moment, it seemed as if change had finally arrived in the Middle East.

Yet in the aftermath of the Arab Spring, development stalled. Although some countries, such as Tunisia, were able to consolidate democratic systems, authoritarian leaders in much of the region successfully counterattacked. In Egypt, the military led a coup in 2013 to depose the democratically elected government; in Libya and Syria, dictators responded to peaceful protests with violence, precipitating brutal civil wars that turned into international proxy conflicts. Even in countries that did not descend into violence, autocrats clamped down on dissent and poured resources into suppressing their own people and undermining democratic transitions across the Middle East. Meanwhile, progress on the human development indicators prioritized by both international experts and U.S. policymakers either stagnated or went into reverse.

Today, nearly ten years later, the situation in the Middle East looks even worse than it did before the Arab Spring.

**MAHA YAHYA** is Director of the Carnegie Middle East Center.



*Spring is in the air? A protest in Algiers, May 2019*

Political repression is more onerous. Economic growth is sluggish and unequal. Corruption remains rampant. Gender equality is more aspiration than reality.

Yet something fundamental has changed. Arab governments have traditionally rested on what political scientists call an “authoritarian bargain,” in which the state provides jobs, security, and services in exchange for political loyalty. This bargain is based on the assumption that ordinary people will remain passive. But today, that assumption no longer holds. Citizens no longer fear their governments. Now more than ever before, ordinary people across the Middle East are politically engaged and willing to voice dissent. And as the massive protest movements in Algeria and Sudan earlier this year showed, they remain willing to

take to the streets to demand a better future, even in the face of repression. The Arab Spring may not have ushered in the immediate reforms that many had hoped for, but in the long run, it may have accomplished something more important: awakening the political energies of the Arab world and setting in motion the long process of Arab revitalization.

### **BEFORE THE SPRING**

During the second half of the twentieth century, Washington’s attitude toward Arab development was essentially pragmatic and cynical. Although it favored the Middle East’s economic growth, the United States believed that the region was best governed by friendly autocrats, such as Egypt’s Anwar al-Sadat and



Iran's Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, who could provide political stability and protect Western interests.

This attitude changed after 9/11. Drawing on the work of international experts, such as those at the UNDP, U.S. policymakers concluded that the extremism emanating from the Middle East was, in part, a byproduct of the Arab world's dismal development record: its repressive governments, entrenched inequalities, and stagnant, state-managed economies, which denied opportunities to ordinary Arab citizens. Democratizing the Middle East and unlocking the human potential of its citizens were touted by the Bush administration as a justification for its wars in the region. After invading Afghanistan in 2001 and Iraq in 2003, the United States cast its subsequent occupation of both countries as an extended exercise in democracy building. Bush announced the broader freedom agenda for the Middle East, creating programs, such as the Middle East Free Trade Area Initiative, to promote free markets and the growth of civil society.

The freedom agenda did not work out as planned. After the United States deposed the Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein in 2003, Iraq sank into a decade of civil conflict that combined an anti-U.S. insurgency with a regional proxy war. This led to a decline in many of the key development indicators that the UNDP had identified as the source of Iraq's problems. But the Middle East's difficulties went deeper than this high-profile debacle. Throughout the first decade of this century, the authoritarian bargain that had long been the foundation of the region's governments

began to come undone. During this period, the region came to be defined by three key trends: growth without well-being, lives without dignity, and liberalization without freedom.

On the economic front, many Arab countries, encouraged by experts at institutions such as the International Monetary Fund, began to privatize state-owned firms, liberalize their trade policies, and end price controls in an effort to spur growth and reduce budgetary pressures on the state. In Egypt, for instance, the share of people employed by the government dropped from 32 percent in 1998 to 26 percent in 2006.

Yet although these policies produced some growth, they did not result in the sort of "trickle down" prosperity promised by their architects. Instead, well-connected insiders captured nearly all the benefits of these reforms. In Tunisia, 220 firms affiliated with the family of President Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali captured close to 21 percent of all net private-sector profits between 2000 and 2010—a fact that was revealed only when the firms were confiscated after the revolution that began in late 2010. State-connected firms also managed to evade \$1.2 billion in import taxes between 2002 and 2009. A similar pattern held in Egypt and Lebanon, where insider firms were able to secure lucrative contracts for housing and construction projects and receive government licenses to invest in key sectors, such as oil and gas and banking.

As part of this push to liberalize their economies, Arab states also ended their employment guarantees and scaled back on the provision of public services, education, and health care. This led to declining living standards among large swaths of the region's middle class,

which was composed mainly of employees in the public and security sectors and which had historically been the biggest defender of the status quo. By 2010, 40.3 million people in the Arab region were either at risk of or suffering from multidimensional poverty, as defined by the UNDP and the Oxford Poverty and Human Development Initiative (OPHI). Between 2000 and 2009, overall living standards declined across the region, as did levels of health and education. In Egypt, the percentage of people living below the national poverty line rose from 16.7 percent in 2000 to 22.0 percent in 2008; in Yemen, the poverty rate rose from 34.8 percent in 2005 to 42.8 percent in 2009.

The withdrawal of public-sector employment guarantees and the reduction in the range and quality of public services resulted in a number of interconnected development challenges. Although literacy and school enrollment increased overall, education did not translate into opportunity. Between 1998 and 2008, the number of unemployed youth in the Middle East increased by 25 percent, with that increase concentrated among the better educated. By 2010, one in four of the region's young people were unemployed, the highest rate in the world. The paucity of employment opportunities forced millions of men and women to turn to the informal economy, where workers typically earn low pay, have unstable incomes, and lack basic social protections, such as health insurance and pensions. In 2009, at least 40 percent of nonagricultural workers in Algeria, Egypt, Morocco, and Tunisia were employed in the informal economy; in Syria, the number was 20 percent.

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Yet for most of the Middle East, a more liberal economy did not result in a more liberal political sphere. Modest protest movements in Egypt and Syria were quickly suffocated by the government. Civic initiatives were stifled, whereas the work of Islamic charities and other faith-based organizations was encouraged, especially in social and emergency assistance, poverty alleviation, and microfinance programs. For the leaders of these states, economic liberalization was not intended to promote free markets and free minds; instead, it was seen as a means to maintain the cohesion and loyalty of the regime's elite. As state resources came under strain, privatization became a strategy for funneling assets to those already in power.

This unraveling served as the backdrop to the Arab Spring. In December 2010, a Tunisian street vendor set himself on fire to protest his mistreatment at the hands of a local official. His act set off a tsunami of protests. In the ensuing months, people across the region—in Algeria, Bahrain, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, Mauritania, Morocco, Oman, Sudan, Syria, Tunisia, Yemen, and the Palestinian territories—took to the streets to demand justice, equality, and an end to their countries' repressive political regimes.

### **DÉJÀ VU ALL OVER AGAIN**

The economic and political conditions that produced the Arab Spring have only worsened in recent years. With the exception of Tunisia, where the opposition succeeded in establishing a democratic political system that remains in place today, many countries of the Middle East have seen an autocratic

restoration since 2011. In Egypt, in 2013, the military overthrew the country's first democratically elected government, replacing it with a dictatorship under the control of President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi. Since taking power, Sisi has ruled the country with an iron fist: between 2013 and 2018, the security forces disappeared over 1,500 Egyptians. And in July 2019, the country's parliament approved a draconian law curtailing the influence of nongovernmental organizations by limiting their scope of action and freedom of movement.

The starkest example of autocratic restoration is in Syria. In 2011, the country saw massive protests against the dictatorial regime of President Bashar al-Assad. Yet rather than step down or meet popular demands for reform, Assad ordered his troops to fire on peaceful demonstrators, launching a bloody civil war that has killed more than half a million people and displaced millions more. Today, the once tottering Assad regime is mopping up the last remnants of opposition and reestablishing control. Thousands of political prisoners have been disappeared or languish in regime dungeons, and the government is preventing around 5.6 million refugees and 6.2 million internally displaced people from returning home.

Meanwhile, the Saudi and Emirati regimes, faced with domestic criticism of their stalled war in Yemen, have jailed bloggers, human rights activists, journalists, and lawyers for criticizing the government online. In perhaps the most notorious example of this increased intolerance of dissent, Saudi agents murdered the journalist Jamal Khashoggi at the Saudi consulate in Istanbul in October 2018. In Lebanon,

often touted as a beacon of freedom in the region, the government has begun to crack down on freedom of speech. In 2018, 38 people were prosecuted for their online posts, four times the number in 2017. Most of these posts criticized politicians, the president, or the country's security agencies. And according to Freedom House, freedom of the press declined in 18 of the Middle East's 21 countries between 2012 and 2017. This regional regression is captured by the Economist Intelligence Unit's Democracy Index, which shows that together the Middle East and North Africa continue to make up the lowest performing region in the world on all measures of democracy: civil liberties, the electoral process and pluralism, the functioning of the government, political culture, and political participation.

As political freedoms have eroded, so, too, have the development gains of the past few decades. A 2018 global report on multidimensional poverty by the UNDP and OPHI found that nearly one-fifth of the population of the Arab states, or 65 million people, lived in extreme poverty, defined by the World Bank as people earning less than \$1.9 per day. Another one-third was either "poor" or "vulnerable." In fact, the Arab region was the only region in the world to experience an increase in extreme poverty between 2013 and 2015, with the rate rising from around four percent to 6.7 percent. In Egypt, recent data indicate that the poverty rate has risen from 28 percent in 2015 to 33 percent today, largely as a result of austerity measures and the devaluation of the Egyptian pound in 2016. In 2016, more than 15 million children in the Middle

East and North Africa were not in school, a regression to 2007 levels. When one takes gender and wealth inequality into account, conditions in the region look even more dismal. Along with the Palestinian territories, 11 Middle Eastern countries—Algeria, Egypt, Iran, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, Morocco, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Tunisia, and Yemen—fall into the worst-performing category on the UN's Gender Development Index, which measures the difference between a country's male and female score on the UN's Human Development Index (HDI), a composite measure of development statistics.

The worst declines have been in countries such as Syria and Yemen, which have both experienced violent conflicts over the past decade. Syria dropped 27 places between 2012 and 2017 on the HDI; Yemen dropped 20 places. Nearly 85 percent of Syrians and 80 percent of Yemenis now live in poverty. And in 2018, 10.5 million Syrians and 20 million Yemenis were food insecure.

This stagnation or regression on key development indicators is coupled with sluggish economic growth. According to the Economist Intelligence Unit, economic growth in the Middle East and North Africa has been steadily declining following a drop in oil prices between 2014 and 2016. The region averaged 3.6 percent growth in 2015–16, but that number fell to 1.6 percent in 2017 and 1.3 percent in 2018. This stagnant growth has put a strain on government finances. Lebanon's public debt is now equal to more than 153 percent of GDP, the third-highest level in the world. Even resource-rich countries, such as Saudi Arabia, are feeling the pinch. To refill state coffers



and finance its growing budget deficit, the kingdom is planning to issue more than \$31 billion in debt this year. And earlier this year, Moody's downgraded Oman's credit rating to "junk" status, citing low oil prices and the country's ballooning deficits.

Faced with mounting economic challenges, governments in the region are stressing the need for entrepreneurship in the private sector. The United Arab Emirates has turned itself into a destination for startups and now boasts major success stories such as the ride-sharing app Careem, the e-commerce platform Souq, and the real estate platform Property Finder. Egypt, too, is a growing regional hub. According to a report by MAGNiTT, an online community for Middle Eastern startups, in 2018, Egypt was the fastest growing in the region "by number of deals." And governments from Bahrain to Lebanon and Saudi Arabia have unveiled initiatives, such as Riyadh's Vision 2030, to promote private-sector investment.

This modest expansion of the private sector, however, has not been enough to provide good jobs for citizens. Unemployment in the Arab states is still high—in 2018, it averaged 7.3 percent; excluding the oil-rich states of Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates, it sat at 10.8 percent. Foreign direct investment remains low; in 2018, according to the International Monetary Fund, foreign direct investment in Arab countries amounted to only 2.4 percent of the global total.

It should come as no surprise, then, that Arab citizens' confidence in their governments is collapsing. According to

Arab Barometer surveys of nationally representative samples from six Arab countries (Algeria, Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Morocco, and Tunisia) and the Palestinian territories, public trust in government has decreased over the past decade. In 2016, more than 60 percent of the respondents said that they trusted government "to a limited extent" or "absolutely [did] not trust it," compared with only 47 percent in 2011. On the other hand, 60 percent of the respondents in 2016 said that they trusted the military to "a great extent," up from 49 percent in 2011. In a December 2018 Zogby poll, a majority of the respondents in Egypt, Iraq, and Tunisia said that they were worse off than they were five years earlier. And earlier this year, a BBC survey of ten Arab countries found that more than half of the respondents between the ages of 18 and 29 wanted to emigrate. Thousands of others have been conscripted into the region's wars.

## **POWER TO THE PEOPLE**

In many respects, then, the Middle East looks worse on many development indicators than it did a decade ago. Yet there is one key difference. Although the protests of the Arab Spring did not lead to the reforms that many had hoped for, they did succeed in fostering a culture of political activism and dissent among Arabs, especially the young, that persists today. Governments can no longer assume that their citizens will remain passive.

In 2018 alone, there were protest movements in Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, Morocco, Sudan, and Tunisia. Earlier this year, protesters in Algeria and Sudan forced their countries' respective leaders, Abdelaziz Bouteflika and

Omar al-Bashir, to step down. In both countries, the protesters took care to remain peaceful—even in the face of violent government responses—while at the same time demanding genuine democratic reforms rather than a new form of military rule. And in both countries, the protesters seemed to have learned from the failed democratic transitions in Egypt and Syria.

In Sudan, protesters continued to call for a peaceful political transition and an accountable government, even after a massacre in June that left at least 100 dead and scores injured. On August 17, the Sudanese military and the opposition reached an agreement on a three-year transitional period, during which civilians and the military will alternate turns in power.

In Algeria, despite the resignation of the ailing Bouteflika in April, citizens have continued to demand the ouster of key figures of the old guard. Some members of Bouteflika's inner circle have resigned or been arrested, and elections have been announced for December. Many protesters are skeptical of the elections, which they see as an effort by the military to bring a pliant president to power. Yet they have already shown that they are not willing to be cowed into accepting a modified version of the old regime.

This new culture of protest is also on display in Syria, which has seen a wave of civilian protests in former rebel strongholds now under the control of the Assad regime. Earlier this year, for example, hundreds of Syrians in the southern city of Daraa—the birthplace of the anti-Assad protests in 2011—turned out to oppose the installation of a statue of Assad's father, the longtime

dictator Hafez al-Assad. The regime may have won the civil war, but these demonstrations suggest that it will struggle to restore its authority.

The Middle East today is witnessing a perfect storm: as social and economic conditions erode and regimes double down on the repressive policies that provoked the Arab Spring, a new generation is coming to the fore. The young Arabs of this new generation are accustomed to voicing their dissatisfaction. They have seen both the promise and the failures of the 2010–11 revolts, and they are resistant to their leaders' attempts at manipulation. Those leaders, moreover, no longer have the means to buy off their populations. What today looks like a regional regression since 2011 may well, in the future, be regarded as the initial phase in a much longer process of Arab revival. The road to that revival will likely be a difficult one, paved with pain. But if there is one thing that Arab populations know, it is that the status quo cannot be sustained. 🌍

# America's Great Satan

## The 40-Year Obsession With Iran

*Daniel Benjamin and Steven Simon*

Imagine historians a century from now trying to decide which foreign power the United States feared most in the decades from the late Cold War through 2020. Sifting through the national security strategies of successive administrations, they would see Russia first as an archenemy of the United States, then as a friend, and finally as a challenging nuisance. They would see China transform from a sometime partner to a great-power rival. North Korea would appear as a sideshow.

Only one country would be depicted as a persistent and implacable foe: Iran. In its official rhetoric and strategic documents, Washington has, since Iran's Islamic Revolution in 1979, consistently portrayed the country as a purely hostile and dangerous actor. In recent months, the United States and Iran have once again, as they have many times in the past, approached the brink of conflict: U.S. President Donald Trump has ripped up his predecessor's nuclear deal with Iran

and adopted a policy of "maximum pressure" to strangle the Iranian economy. Iran, meanwhile, has responded by heightening tensions, attacking several oil tankers traversing the Persian Gulf, shooting down a U.S. drone, and striking an oil facility in Abqaiq, Saudi Arabia.

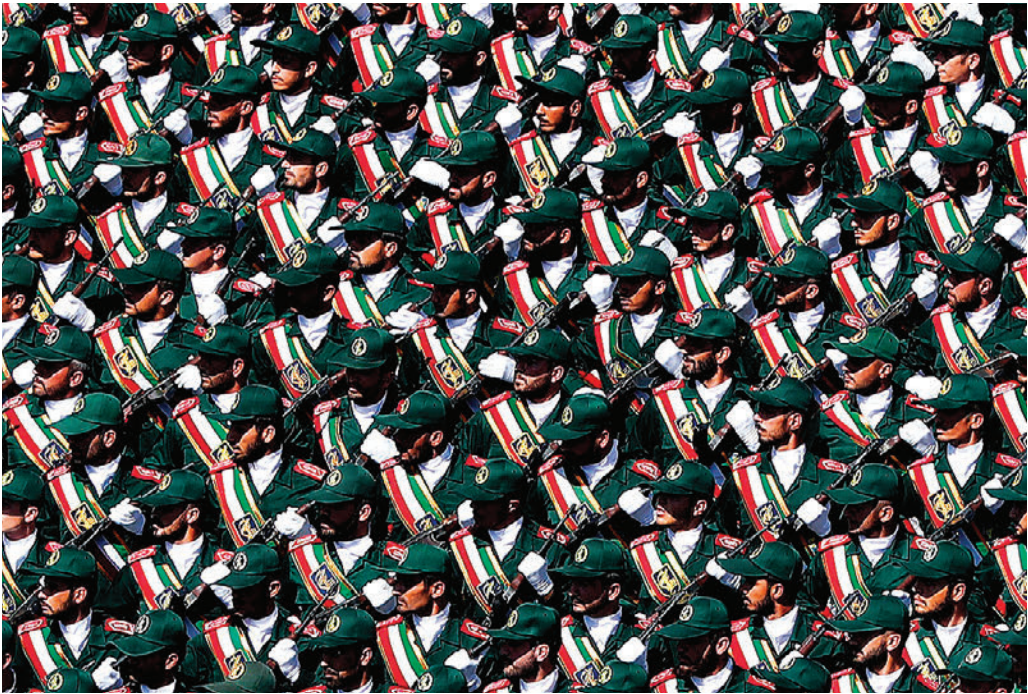
No U.S. president has been as capricious as Trump, and there is a possibility that, after flirting with escalation, he will pivot toward an accommodation with Iran. (His recent dismissal of National Security Adviser John Bolton, an extreme Iran hawk, suggests that this process could already be underway.) But Trump's approach during his first three years in office did not emerge from a void. It was an extension of the deep animus toward Iran that has plagued U.S. policymaking for the last 40 years. Previous administrations had balanced this hostility with pragmatism and periodic attempts at outreach, often cloaked in the language of confrontation; now, driven by greater political incentives and intensified lobbying by Israel and Saudi Arabia, Trump has inflated this animus to cartoonish proportions. In doing so, he runs the risk of a serious miscalculation. Iran is not an existential threat to the United States, but a serious conflict with it—at a time when Washington is threatened by great-power rivals and committed to drawing down its presence in the Middle East—would be costly and counterproductive.

Faced with the real prospect of a war that would benefit no one, it is time for the United States to rethink some of the assumptions that have led to the current impasse. It is time to relegate Iran's remarkable grip on U.S. strategic thinking—call it "the Persian captivity"—to the dustbin.

**DANIEL BENJAMIN** is Director of the John Sloan Dickey Center for International Understanding at Dartmouth College. He served as Coordinator for Counterterrorism at the U.S. State Department from 2009 to 2012.

**STEVEN SIMON** is Professor of International Relations at Colby College and served on the National Security Council in the Clinton and Obama administrations.





*Don't believe the hype: Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps troops, July 2018*

### **A COUNTRY OR A CAUSE?**

In balance-of-power terms, Washington's obsession with Tehran is absurd. Iran's population is one-fourth the size of the United States', and its economy is barely two percent as large. The United States and its closest allies in the Middle East—Israel, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates—together spend at least \$750 billion annually on their armed forces, about 50 times as much as what Iran spends. Both Israel and the United States can produce state-of-the-art weapons, as well as reconnaissance, surveillance, and battle-management technologies. Iran cannot. Its industrial base is aged. Its air force and navy field outdated weapons systems. It possesses ballistic and cruise missiles and long-range drones that could strike Israel or the Gulf states, but it cannot use them without inviting devastating retaliation (although, admittedly, it appears to have run this

risk with its September attacks on Saudi Aramco facilities).

Despite Iran's paltry conventional capabilities, U.S. policymakers—who have long sought to prevent any regional state from exercising hegemony in the Persian Gulf—have seen Iran as a threat for two interlocking reasons. The first is geography: Iran has a long shoreline on the Persian Gulf, through which about one-fifth of the world's oil flows. In theory, it could attempt to block the flow of oil by closing the Strait of Hormuz, with potentially disastrous effects on the global economy. Yet practically speaking, this threat is remote. At no time in the last 40 years has Iran managed to close the strait, and even if it did, Iraq, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates could all use or develop alternative export routes. Iran could not.

The second cause for U.S. concern is Iran's nuclear program. If Iran produced



an atomic weapon, it could conceivably establish the regional hegemony that U.S. strategic doctrine seeks to prevent. A nuclear-armed Iran would revolutionize the strategic landscape in the Middle East and pose a significant threat to Israel, Washington's closest ally in the region. Under U.S. President Barack Obama, the United States largely solved this problem with the 2015 nuclear deal, the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, which for all intents and purposes ended the country's nuclear program for 15 years. In 2018, however, Trump withdrew from the JCPOA, arguing that a better agreement with Iran was possible. Since then, his administration has been using sanctions to try to force Iran's leaders back to the negotiating table.

Much of the administration's antipathy toward Iran is explained by what Secretary of State Mike Pompeo routinely refers to as Iran's "malign activities"—its attempts to spread its influence across the Middle East through terrorism, political subversion, and assistance to Shiite groups. These activities are the reason why Iran is routinely (and deservedly) referred to as "the world's foremost state sponsor of terrorism." They are also, for Iran hawks, the best evidence that the country is still a revolutionary power dedicated to undermining the interests of the United States and its allies. For opponents of the JCPOA, including the Trump administration, the deal offered Iran tacit recognition as a legitimate interlocutor. Iran's compliance with the deal, these opponents argued, was a cynical ploy to advance its expansionist objectives within the region. (This, of course, was a classic Catch-22: the hawks saw both compliance with the deal and any lack of compliance as evidence of Iran's malign intentions.)

It is true that Iran has committed more than its share of atrocities. Yet it is no longer the same country that it was in the 1980s, when its revolutionary Islamist government really was bent on remaking the regional order. Iran's support for terrorism, for example, has diminished substantially in the last 20 years. And although Tehran and its proxies still occasionally pull off a successful attack, such as the 2012 bus bombing in Burgas, Bulgaria, their attempts are of a smaller scale than before, and many of their recent plots have been absurdly ineffective. In 2011, for instance, an Iranian plot to assassinate the Saudi ambassador in Washington was doomed from the outset because the Iranian agent approached an informant for the Drug Enforcement Administration to carry out the killing. And in 2012, Iranian terrorists in Bangkok accidentally set off an explosion in their own safe house. When Thai police arrived at the scene, one of the Iranians threw a grenade—which hit a tree, bounced back at him, and blew off one of his legs.

All terrorism is bad, but the hawks exaggerate the threat posed by Iranian-sponsored terrorism, which is relatively lackluster compared with the jihadi terrorism that has at times been tolerated or even financed by Washington's Sunni partners. Iran's activities are less damaging to global stability than, say, Pakistan's support for terrorist groups that target India or Russia's annexation of Crimea, yet Washington treats Tehran as a pariah while preserving relations with Islamabad and Moscow. There is clearly something going on that transcends strategic interest.

One major caveat is that Iran supports the Lebanese terrorist group—cum—political party Hezbollah, whose large

stockpile of missiles and rockets poses a serious threat to Israel. Yet Tehran's motivations are as much geopolitical as ideological: the missiles are Iran's main strategic deterrent against Israel. And this deterrence has generally prevailed since 2006, when it broke down through incompetence and misperception. The Israeli government has made it clear that if it ever has to fight another war with Hezbollah, it will invade Lebanon and leave only after it has destroyed Hezbollah and its armory. The situation is obviously delicate, but neither Israel nor Iran has an interest in upsetting the apple cart.

Aside from terrorism, many of Iran's attempts to expand its reach throughout the Middle East should be seen for what they are: opportunistic responses to blunders by the United States and its partners. Hawks often warn of Iran's influence in Iraq, for instance, but this is fundamentally a result of the U.S. invasion in 2003, which toppled Saddam Hussein's Sunni minority government and empowered the country's Shiite majority. Even with increased Iranian influence, moreover, successive governments in Baghdad have maintained good relations with both Tehran and Washington—indeed, the current government may be the most pro-U.S. Iraqi government yet. Iran's backing of the regime of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad is an attempt to sustain the status quo—and defend a once reliable ally—after it was threatened by Sunni Arab states that were trying to overthrow Assad by arming and funding Syrian rebels. And Iran's support for the Houthis in Yemen has been a largely convenient attempt to bleed its Saudi rivals dry.

The archrealist Henry Kissinger famously said that Iran must “decide whether it is a country or a cause.” The

phrase has been invoked by much lazier strategists to justify a permanent hard line against Iran. After all, if your adversary is motivated primarily by ideology, then it is less likely to be open to compromise or accommodation. The problem is that this framing has blinded many American analysts to Iran's real motivations: maximizing its security interests in a deeply hostile environment.

### **BAD BLOOD**

The United States' relations with Iran date back to World War II, when thousands of U.S. troops were deployed to Iran to secure a rail line essential to the year-round supply of the Soviet Union, then a U.S. ally. Although U.S. involvement in Iran remained limited in the early postwar period, Washington did participate as a junior partner in a British conspiracy to overthrow Iran's elected prime minister, Mohammad Mosaddeq, in 1953. The overthrow of Mosaddeq was the original sin of the U.S.-Iranian relationship, and Iranian anger at the coup was later compounded by U.S. and Israeli support for Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi, whose repressive policies and inept attempts at modernization undermined popular support for his regime. The shah's intimate relationship with the United States tainted both parties in the eyes of Iranians, contributing to the resentment that resulted in the Islamic Revolution of 1979.

The revolution marked a turning point. In late 1979, Iranian students stormed the U.S. embassy in Tehran and took its American staff hostage, leading U.S. President Jimmy Carter to sever diplomatic relations in April 1980. Soon, U.S. and Iranian interests were clashing across the Middle East. In 1980, Iraq attacked

Iran; after repulsing this initial assault, in 1982, Iran invaded Iraq with the aim of overthrowing Saddam and spreading the Islamic revolution, sparking U.S. fears of Iranian hegemony in the Persian Gulf. In 1983, after a U.S. peacekeeping mission in Lebanon transformed into an intervention backing the country's Christian government, Iran and Syria supported Lebanese Shiite militias that attacked American diplomats, military personnel, and intelligence officers. And although the United States, fearful that an Iraqi victory could lead Iran to turn to the Soviet Union for help, made efforts during the mid-1980s to back Tehran in the Iran-Iraq War, by the late 1980s, after the revelation of the Iran-contra scandal had rocked the Reagan administration, Washington had decisively thrown its support behind Baghdad.

By the early 1990s, the United States had painted itself into a corner. Washington felt that it had to indefinitely suppress the ambitions of both Iran and Iraq, rather than use one to balance the other. Yet this policy proved unsustainable. After the United States demolished Saddam's regime in 2003, it was left with an enemy, Iran, but no local partner to contain it. At the same time, the U.S. invasion of Iraq convinced Iranian leaders—now faced with U.S. troops on both their Afghan and their Iraqi borders—to take the opportunity to draw U.S. blood by transferring deadly explosive devices to Iraqi Shiite militias, further worsening relations between the countries. For a brief period during the Obama administration, the United States was able to use a combination of diplomacy and pressure to create space for the negotiation of the JCPOA. But under Trump, the United

States' old hostility has reemerged with a vengeance.

The durability of the United States' 40-year obsession with Iran is remarkable. Consider that the United States fought and lost a decadelong war in Vietnam that claimed more than 58,000 American lives, yet full diplomatic ties between Washington and Hanoi were reestablished in 1995, only two decades after the last helicopters left Saigon. Iranian misdeeds—above all, holding 52 U.S. diplomats and other citizens hostage for 444 days from 1979 to 1980—have certainly played a role. But the number of American deaths that can in any way be attributed to Iran since 1979 is shy of 500. On 12 occasions over the last 18 years, the polling organization Gallup has asked Americans the question, "What one country anywhere in the world do you consider to be the United States' greatest enemy today?" Iran topped the list five times, ranking higher than China six times and higher than Russia eight times, despite not having nuclear weapons, a deep-water navy, or the ability to project power in any serious fashion.

How can this hostility be explained? One reason is that Iran fits neatly into a well-defined American idea of what a serious threat should look like. Similar to the Soviet Union during the Cold War, Iran has a revolutionary ideology, an expansionist orientation, and a network of allies around the world—in Iran's case, the Shiite communities in the Middle East and in their diasporas in South America and West Africa. And until the U.S. invasion of Iraq, Iran had some success in cultivating its image as a global ideological power, posing as the leader of Muslim resistance to U.S. hegemony. With the fall

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of Saddam and the empowerment of Iraq's Shiite community, however, the region's Sunni rulers effectively recast the Iranian threat as a confessional one within the Islamic world. Instead of being seen as an anticolonial power, Iran became the leader of a "Shiite crescent" menacing the United States' Sunni allies.

To make matters worse, the United States and Iran have dealt with each other in a dramatically different manner than the United States and the Soviet Union did. Cognizant of their respective nuclear arsenals and global reach, Washington and Moscow sought to stay engaged with each other and carefully avoided interfering with each other's vital interests. Kissinger famously characterized the Soviet leadership as "essentially shits," but that did not stop him—or other U.S. leaders—from interacting with them. By contrast, the United States has refused to engage with Iran, and the two countries' relationship has been one of near-constant irritation and provocation.

If anything, U.S. antipathy toward Iran has grown more intense over the last two decades, even as Tehran has dialed back its revolutionary ambitions. This increased animus has coincided with both the rising influence of evangelical Christians within the Republican Party and the growth of public support for Israel in the United States. In 1989, Gallup found that 49 percent of Americans had a favorable overall view of Israel. Today, the figure stands at 69 percent. Pro-Israel sentiment has risen especially rapidly among conservative Republicans, reaching a peak of 87 percent last year. Democrats' support has also grown, but currently sits at only 62 percent.

The distorting effect of Israeli influence on U.S. policy toward Iran has been especially pronounced since 2012. That year, the Republican candidate for president, Mitt Romney, seized the U.S.-Israeli relationship as a Republican asset, winning a quasi-official endorsement from Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. Politicians and policymakers on both sides of the aisle rushed to outdo one another with displays of their commitment to helping Israel secure its interests. More recently, Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, who has not so discreetly aligned himself with Israel while also skillfully courting the Trump family, has turned Riyadh into a Republican asset, as well. To a greater extent than ever before, the United States under Trump has outsourced its Middle East policy to Israel and Saudi Arabia. In August, for instance, the Trump administration permitted Israel to carry out an airstrike in Iraq against an Iranian-allied militia—an action that clearly cut against the U.S. interest in Iraqi stability.

For the United States, this hostility toward Iran is costly. For one thing, it increases the risk of armed conflict. It is both true and fortunate that since 1987–88, when U.S. and Iranian ships clashed in the waters of the Persian Gulf, the two countries have avoided open hostilities. But the current proximity of U.S. and Iranian forces, the countries' history of sustained antagonism, and their leaders' tendency to see each other as locked in a zero-sum struggle all heighten the risk of conflict. The absence of diplomatic ties and other communication channels makes confrontations even more likely to escalate. Everyone knows what a major U.S. war in the Middle East would look like, and it is clearly best avoided.

The current U.S. approach to Iran also risks driving a wedge between the United States and Europe. Although the Europeans have no great love for the Iranian regime, they prefer negotiation to conflict. They are particularly proud of having helped author the JCPOA, which, apart from its other virtues, was a masterpiece of complex diplomatic coordination. The transatlantic disconnect on Iran reaches back at least to the administration of U.S. President Bill Clinton, when Congress voted to impose sanctions on European companies selling equipment to Iran's oil industry. But it has intensified under Trump. The transatlantic alliance may not have the same profound strategic importance that it did during the Cold War, but in an era when both China and Russia are challenging the West, it is nonetheless vital. Allowing Iran to become a sore point between the United States and Europe would be staggeringly imprudent.

Finally, U.S.-Iranian antipathy poses a threat to regional stability. The majority of states in the Middle East are fragile; in the past decade alone, two, Libya and Yemen, have collapsed, and one, Syria, has come close. The economic, political, and environmental strains on the region will only increase over the coming years. For most states, with the exception of a few oil monarchies, there is little prospect of relief. The United States has an interest in helping these countries hold together. But its campaign of maximum pressure on Iran, which is intended to bankrupt the regime and foster revolutionary conditions, runs precisely counter to this interest. However distasteful the current government in Tehran may be, the consequences of state collapse in Iran—including a likely refugee crisis and

enormous strains on neighboring countries—would be even worse.

## **WE CAN WORK IT OUT**

Washington and Tehran have rarely gotten along. Yet Trump's blanket hostility toward Iran represents a departure from the norm of previous presidents. From the time of the Islamic Revolution, successive U.S. administrations have had an ambivalent relationship with Iran. Publicly, they have often taken a hard line, suggesting that the country harbors an immutable enmity for the United States. In private, however, both Democratic and Republican administrations have sought a more pragmatic approach. None, prior to the Trump administration, has consistently taken the position that a working relationship with the clerical regime is beyond the pale.

This split between public and private approaches began under Carter. After the shah fled Iran in January 1979 and requested entry into the United States for medical care, Carter waffled for months before finally admitting him in October, against the advice of his ambassador in Tehran. Behind the scenes, the CIA continued to provide the new Iranian government with sensitive intelligence until November 1979, when Islamist students, outraged at Carter's decision, seized the U.S. embassy in Tehran. It was only the hostage crisis, followed by a botched U.S. attempt to rescue the hostages in 1980, that finally convinced Carter that the revolution had damaged U.S.-Iranian ties beyond repair.

Even President Ronald Reagan, canonized for his moral clarity, was willing to work with Iran when it was convenient. During Reagan's first year and a half in office, the United States

allowed Israel to send Iran a vast quantity of American-made weapons to aid in the war against Saddam. Despite the fact that Iran and Syria colluded in separate attacks in 1983 against the U.S. embassy and a U.S. Marine barracks in Beirut, killing 17 embassy personnel and 241 U.S. troops, Reagan never retaliated. By his second term, he was once again looking for an opening to Iran. His administration had two main reasons for resuming ties: it needed Iran's help to free U.S. hostages held by Iranian proxies in Lebanon, and it wanted to increase U.S. leverage in Tehran at a time when it seemed as if the Soviets might try to ingratiate themselves with the clerical regime. In 1985, the United States resumed selling military equipment to Iran via Israeli intermediaries, an operation that continued for over a year, until it was exposed by a Lebanese newspaper. The revelation of these sales nearly destroyed Reagan's presidency—especially once it emerged that the National Security Council staffer Oliver North had used money from the sales to illegally fund the Nicaraguan contras.

The usual story about the Iran-contra scandal is that Reagan was desperately concerned about the U.S. hostages in Lebanon, but it may be closer to the truth to say that Reagan's approach to Iran paralleled his approach to the Soviet Union. He believed that both regimes were unsustainable and that the best way to hasten their demise was through dialogue backed by military strength. His problem, of course, was that Iran had no Mikhail Gorbachev, the reformist Soviet premier who became Reagan's negotiating partner.

Although U.S. Iran policy fell into a lull under President George H. W. Bush,

it resumed under his successor, Clinton. After Washington tightened sanctions, Iran orchestrated the 1996 bombing of the Khobar Towers complex, in Saudi Arabia, then in use by American military personnel enforcing a no-fly zone over Iraq. Nineteen members of the U.S. Air Force were killed. (As it has under Trump, American pressure invited an Iranian response.) Yet by the time blame for the attack could be authoritatively pinned on Iran, in 1997, retaliation had lost its attraction—all the more so since Mohammad Khatami, who had pledged to end Iran's provocative foreign policy, had been elected president in the interim. Clinton moved swiftly to capitalize on Khatami's reform program but had little leeway to reduce the congressionally mandated sanctions, an Iranian *sine qua non* for meaningful diplomatic progress. What might have been an opportunity to normalize the bilateral relationship fizzled.

President George W. Bush never really had chance to implement an Iran policy before the 9/11 attacks derailed his plans. Once Bush regained his balance, however, the United States and Iran cooperated closely in Afghanistan following the 2001 U.S. invasion. But in May 2003, U.S. intelligence intercepted a congratulatory message from al Qaeda militants under house arrest in Iran to the terrorists who had assaulted a housing compound in Riyadh. Bush promptly shut down U.S. cooperation with Iran in Afghanistan, Iran began shipping weapons to Shiite insurgents in Iraq, and the chance for cooperation vanished.

The failures of U.S.-Iranian rapprochement cannot be laid solely at the feet of Washington, of course. Since 1979, Iran has often gone out of its way to

foment tension. Tehran and its proxies have carried out assassinations, kidnappings, and terrorist attacks against Americans and U.S. allies. The clerical regime has made anti-Americanism a core component of its ideology and public rhetoric. And although elements of the Iranian leadership have long favored détente, powerful constituencies within Tehran—including hard-line clerics and the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps—have time and again sought to scuttle efforts at diplomatic outreach.

The Obama administration, however, demonstrated that Tehran's belligerence need not be an unsurmountable obstacle to progress. Like Clinton, Obama entered office determined to get tough on Iran. During his first term, he used his credibility with the Europeans to expand multilateral sanctions on Iran, hoping to force Tehran to negotiate over its nuclear weapons program. Then, Iranian presidential elections in 2013 replaced the incendiary Mahmoud Ahmadinejad with Hassan Rouhani, a Western-educated cleric who was willing to exchange a long-term freeze on Iran's nuclear weapons program for relief from U.S. sanctions. The resulting agreement, the JCPOA, was narrowly focused on the nuclear issue: it was not intended by either side to resolve the myriad other impediments to U.S.-Iranian reconciliation. But many supporters of the deal thought that the successful negotiation of such a complex agreement would set a useful precedent, allowing for future dialogue on other issues. After bringing maximal multilateral pressure on Iran in his first term, Obama left office having laid the groundwork for improved relations.

The 2008 global financial crisis brought the world's economy closer to collapse than ever before.

**Has enough been done to prevent another crisis?**

# Systemic Risk in the Financial Sector

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## **GETTING BACK TO NORMAL**

There are, to be sure, flickering signals that Trump will end up conforming to the established pattern on Iran, striving to seem tough in public while seeking a private accommodation. His decision not to retaliate against Iran's downing of an American drone in June, his efforts to arrange a phone call with Rouhani, and his recent firing of Bolton all point in this direction. But such an about-face is unlikely. Trump's Republican backers, both in and out of Congress, still support a hard line against Tehran, and the Iranians will be doubtful that Trump can be trusted to stick with any deal. He will likely leave office as determined to subjugate Iran as he was on entering it.

Yet the United States—if not under Trump, then under his successor—has a compelling interest in finding a *modus vivendi* with Iran, just as it repeatedly sought to do with the Soviet Union during the Cold War. Washington's most important goal should be to prevent Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons—a development that could destabilize the entire Middle East. The most effective way to do this is through multilateral diplomacy along the lines of the JCPOA. This would not only provide for an inspections regime that would augment Western intelligence gathering but also create incentives for Iranian cooperation; by contrast, a confrontational approach will strengthen Iran's hard-liners and produce perpetual incentives for Iran to cheat. Finding a workable arrangement, however, will require bold diplomacy by a future Democratic administration, which will need to overcome the objections of both the Republican Party and an Israeli government that—regardless of the

party in office—will want to use U.S. power to beat Iran into submission.

A second U.S. goal must be to gain some leverage over Iranian foreign policy in order to reduce the likelihood of a conflict between Washington and Tehran. This is easier said than done, since a U.S. administration would have to simultaneously reach out to the Iranians and mitigate the anxieties of U.S. allies. It will also be challenging because of potential spoilers on the Iranian side—namely, the hard-liners who have on several occasions blocked rapprochement. At a minimum, gaining meaningful influence over Iranian policymaking would require opening a military-to-military channel of communication with Iran, with the initial goal of preventing accidental clashes. That link could then progress to quiet multilateral talks on technical questions, move on to higher-level political discussions regarding areas of potential cooperation, and finally culminate in diplomatic normalization.

Only when the U.S. embassy reopens in Tehran will there be enough regular, businesslike interactions between the two sides for the United States to influence Iranian decision-making. Now that the war in Syria is effectively over, deterrence is holding on the Israeli-Lebanese border, Israel has demonstrated its resolve in preventing Iran's entrenchment near the Golan Heights, and the United Arab Emirates has walked away from the Saudi war in Yemen, there is an opportunity for cautious movement. Trump is unlikely to grasp it, largely because the perceived political cost is too high. But the next administration should, at long last, give sustained engagement a try. 🌐

# The Tunisia Model

## Lessons From a New Arab Democracy

*Sarah Yerkes*

**T**he story of how the Tunisian revolution began is well known. On December 17, 2010, a 26-year-old fruit vendor named Mohamed Bouazizi from the town of Sidi Bouzid set himself on fire outside a local government building. The man's self-immolation—an act of protest against repeated mistreatment by police and local officials—sparked protests that quickly spread across the country. Within a few weeks, President Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali had stepped down and fled the country after 23 years in power, offering Tunisia an unprecedented opportunity for a democratic opening. A massive wave of uprisings soon swept the country's neighbors, reaching all the way to the Levant and the Persian Gulf.

Less well known is what happened inside Tunisia next. Even though the country had become ground zero of the Arab Spring, its transition was quickly overshadowed by events in more populous Arab countries with deeper ties to the United States and more patently cruel rulers. But nearly a decade on, Tunisia remains the only success story to have come out of the many uprisings. Across the Arab world, countries that looked as though they might follow in its

footsteps have become mired in civil war, as has happened in Libya, Syria, and Yemen. Others, such as Bahrain and Egypt, have returned to repression and authoritarianism. Tunisia, by contrast, has drafted a progressive constitution and held free and fair elections at the presidential, parliamentary and local levels. In July, when President Beji Caid Essebsi died at the age of 92, the transition to a caretaker government was smooth and unremarkable. Several problems persist and continue to hobble the country, in particular a long track record of economic mismanagement and a disconcerting lack of trust in public institutions. But for all the unfinished business Tunisia still faces, its example remains a source of hope across the region.

In achieving this feat, Tunisia has helped dispel the myth that Arab societies or Islam is not compatible with democracy. But the country's story also offers lessons for beyond the Arab world: that transitions from authoritarianism require brave leaders willing to put country above politics and that such transitions are by nature chaotic and halting. For the international community, this means that states in transition should be offered the diplomatic and, above all, financial support they need to bear the growing pains of democracy and come away with as few scars as possible.

### AFTERSHOCKS OF REVOLUTION

Postrevolutionary Tunisia inherited a state in disrepair. The Ben Ali regime had been notoriously corrupt. It plundered the country's public coffers and stashed the money in bank accounts belonging to Ben Ali's wife, Leila Trabelsi, and her family. The government favored certain coastal regions, neglecting

**SARAH YERKES** is a Fellow at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.

the south and the interior of the country, from where the revolution would later emerge. Political competition was nonexistent, and potential challengers to Ben Ali's ruling party, the Democratic Constitutional Rally, were either banned outright or forced to operate under restrictions so severe as to permanently keep them on the sidelines. Those who ran afoul of the regime were imprisoned and tortured.

Leaving this dismal record behind was not easy, and in the first years after Ben Ali's ouster, the country endured serious setbacks. Debates on the role of religion in public life were particularly divisive. Ben Ali's regime had prided itself on its secular and progressive approach to women's rights in a country where 99 percent of the population is Sunni Muslim. When a popular Islamist political movement, Ennahda, emerged in the 1980s, Ben Ali promptly banned it and imprisoned or exiled tens of thousands of its members. But when Tunisians voted for a constituent assembly to draft a new, postrevolutionary constitution in the fall of 2011—the country's first-ever democratic election—Ennahda received the most votes of any party, setting up a fierce fight over the direction the transition. Among the most contentious issues was women's standing in civic and political life. For Ennahda, women were "complementary" to men—but that term angered non-Islamists, who feared that writing it into the constitution would open a back door to gender discrimination. The critics eventually prevailed. But the constitution-drafting process had exposed painful cleavages within Tunisian society.

Ennahda's win in the 2011 election allowed it to form a three-way governing

alliance with two smaller, secular parties, imposing a semblance of order on the postrevolutionary chaos. But beneath the surface, the situation remained unstable, in part because many secularists were as afraid of Ennahda's Islamist agenda as they were of a return to authoritarianism. In 2013, frustration with the Ennahda-led government culminated in a national crisis. In February of that year, Islamist extremists murdered the prominent leftist opposition leader Chokri Belaid. The assassination sparked mass protests, with many accusing the government of standing by in the face of violent extremism. The Tunisian General Labor Union, or UGTT, called its first general strike since 1978, bringing the country to a standstill for days. When another leftist leader, Mohamed Brahmi, was assassinated a few months later, more large-scale demonstrations followed. Protesters were now calling for the Constituent Assembly to dissolve.

The turmoil of 2013 could have easily derailed the entire transition process. That it did not was largely due to the work of four powerful civil society organizations—the UGTT, the country's bar association, its largest employers' association, and a human rights group—which came together for talks in the summer of 2013. The National Dialogue Quartet, as the group came to be known, represented constituencies with widely differing interests, but its members soon agreed on a path forward, calling for a new electoral law, a new prime minister and cabinet, and the adoption of the long-delayed constitution. It then mediated a national dialogue among the major political parties. The talks convinced Ennahda to step down and brought a new, technocratic government to power.



*Good news: a merchant in Tunis, May 2017*

The Quartet also helped the Constituent Assembly resolve sticking points in the new constitution, and in January 2014, the deputies passed the new text in a near-unanimous vote.

It would not be the last time that coalition building allowed postrevolutionary Tunisia to weather a moment of uncertainty. In late 2014, the country held its first-ever free parliamentary and presidential elections. The contest was fair, but turnout—48 percent of eligible voters for the legislative and 45 percent for the presidential election—was low for such a monumental event, suggesting that Tunisia was not the vibrant democracy many had hoped for. And the results seemed to set Tunisia up for further conflict. Essebsi, the presidential candidate with the most votes, was a staunch secularist and longtime member of the pre-revolutionary regime who had run on an explicitly anti-Ennahda platform. His party, Nidaa Tounes, was a loose coalition

of non-Islamist parties and activists united in their opposition to the Islamist group and little else.

Essebsi therefore took Islamists and secularists alike by surprise when, shortly after the election, he formed a coalition with Ennahda. Essebsi, it soon emerged, had been meeting for secret talks with the Ennahda leader Rached Ghannouchi, a remarkable development, given that Essebsi had served as foreign minister under the regime that had imprisoned and tortured Ghannouchi. Their public rapprochement sent a powerful message to the public: the days of bitter political rivalries were in the past. A democratic Tunisia could accommodate leaders of all stripes—Islamists and secularists, conservatives and liberals.

Violent extremism, however, still punctuated the country's progress. Terrorist attacks in early 2015, first at the National Bardo Museum, in downtown Tunis, and later at a beach resort in



Sousse, killed a total of 60 people, most of them European tourists. The attacks were a significant blow to Tunisia's tourism industry, which makes up around eight percent of the country's GDP. They also shed light on the severity of Tunisia's problem with Islamist fundamentalism. The chaos of the early transition years had made it difficult for the Tunisian government to clamp down on the recruitment of extremists, particularly in the country's traditionally marginalized interior. And as democracy flourished without providing real change to the lives of Tunisians—the economy remained stagnant and unemployment high—many felt they had nothing to lose by joining the ranks of extremist groups. By 2015, Tunisia was infamous for being both the sole democracy in the Arab world and the top exporter to Iraq and Syria of foreign fighters for the Islamic State, or ISIS.

To make matters worse, Tunisia shared a porous border with Libya, where a chaotic civil war had allowed ISIS to flourish. Without much hassle, Tunisian citizens could cross into Libya, train in ISIS camps there, and return to Tunisia to carry out attacks at home—as the perpetrators of the Bardo and Sousse attacks had done. To this day, extremists also hide out on the other side of the country, in the mountainous border area between Tunisia and Algeria, from where they periodically carry out small-scale attacks against Tunisian security forces. Thanks largely to Western assistance, the Tunisian state has greatly improved its counterterrorism capabilities. But as the region's only democracy, Tunisia has a target painted on its back. This past summer, both al Qaeda and ISIS called for fighters to refocus their attention on the country.

Foreign assistance has helped the country in a number of areas, including counterterrorism, but it bears emphasizing that the main drive for change came from within. Before 2011, U.S. ties with Tunisia were as good as nonexistent. U.S. President Barack Obama came to power seeking a new beginning with the Muslim world and made clear that, unlike his predecessor, he had no intention of imposing democracy on the Arab world. But when grassroots-led democratic movements swept the region, the Obama administration was determined to protect them, at least initially. It threw its weight behind the protests, both rhetorically and financially. U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton visited Tunisia less than two months after Ben Ali's departure to emphasize U.S. support for the transition. U.S. bilateral assistance to Tunisia jumped from \$15 million in 2009 to \$26 million in 2011. Multilateral programs provided several hundred million dollars more, bringing the U.S. total to over \$1.4 billion since 2011. (The Trump administration has tried to make dramatic cuts in each of its proposed budgets, in line with its effort to slash foreign aid globally, but consistent congressional support has kept aid for Tunisia steady.) The European Union and its member states also upped their support in the years following the revolution, providing \$2.65 billion between 2011 and 2017.

Despite that assistance, Tunisia still faces several major obstacles. Youth unemployment hovers around 30 percent, and inflation is rising. Since the revolution, the suicide rate has nearly doubled, and close to 100,000 highly educated and skilled workers have left the country. Tunisia recently overtook Eritrea as the

country with the largest number of migrants arriving in Italy by sea. To slow this trend and improve Tunisians' economic prospects, the government will need to take some unpopular measures, such as cutting wages in the public sector. This will require confronting the powerful labor unions—in particular, the UGTT—which at times have effectively shut down the country with massive strikes. But inaction will only turn off international lenders and exacerbate the brain drain, mass emigration, and extremist recruitment.

Reforming sclerotic government institutions is another priority. The judiciary remains largely unreformed. Many judges are holdovers from the Ben Ali era, and the byzantine legal code is not always in line with the constitution. Most egregious, the country currently has no constitutional court, largely because lawmakers cannot agree on whom to appoint as judges. The first democratically elected parliament, in office from 2014 to October 2019, struggled mightily to pass legislation and suffered from severe absenteeism, with around half its members missing in action on any given day.

The most important item on the agenda is regaining the confidence of the Tunisian public. As of early 2019, only 34 percent of Tunisians trusted the president, and only 32 percent trusted their parliament, according to a poll by the International Republican Institute. When it comes to voicing their concerns, many of them, especially the young, prefer the streets over the ballot box. Around 9,000 protests are held each year, the majority of which originate in the same traditionally marginalized regions where the revolution started. This problem has no easy solution, but devolving greater powers to the local level would help. The

country's first-ever local elections, held in May 2018, were a step in the right direction. Not only did they introduce one of the most progressive gender-parity requirements of any electoral law globally, with 47 percent of local council seats going to women; they also opened the gates to young candidates, with 37 percent of the seats going to those under 35.

### **BUILDING THE SHIP AS IT SAILS**

Tunisians are quick to point out that their country doesn't provide a model that can be cut and pasted onto other national contexts. But their experience still holds important lessons about how to support democracy. For outsiders, the main takeaway is to keep one's distance at first. Tunisia succeeded thanks not to the presence of a pro-democracy agenda led by other countries but to the absence of such an effort. The transition began with a grassroots call for change, which foreign donors and international partners later stepped in to support. This made it hard for the government to discredit the protests as a foreign-driven, neocolonialist project. Wherever possible, the United States and Europe should allow home-grown change to occur without premature interference. Once democratic transitions take root, outside governments should be quick to offer financial support and training. In places where change seems unlikely to emerge on its own, foreign donors should make use of conditional aid and provide larger pots of funds to countries that meet certain political and economic indicators. The Millennium Challenge Corporation and the European Union's "more for more" principle, both of which reward countries for political and economic reform, are good examples of this approach.

Young democracies, for their part, can learn from Tunisia's brand of consensus politics. Tunisia's transition could well have failed in 2013 had two leaders, Essebsi and Ghannouchi, not put democracy and pluralism ahead of their own political ambitions. Budding democratic leaders are often tempted to fall into autocratic patterns of behavior and promote their own agendas by hoarding power. In the early stages of a democratic transition, however, leaders need to share political space and prioritize pluralism over exclusion, such that once the situation has stabilized, there is enough room for healthy political competition.

Likewise, democracies in the making should heed the cautionary tale of Tunisia's gridlocked Constituent Assembly. For its first three years, the new government in Tunis operated without a constitution to guide its actions. And today, almost six years after the constitution's ratification, much of it has not been implemented. Several of the bodies it mandates, such as a constitutional court, remain to be formed. Tunisia is building the democratic ship as it sails, which has led to public frustration and confusion. Transitioning countries would be well served by clearly establishing the rules of the game from the outset and developing an efficient and realistic timeline for forming the crucial institutions to make democracy work.

There are limits, however, to what one can learn from Tunisia. In particular, its experience offers no satisfying answer about how to sequence political and economic reforms. Leaders in Tunis chose to focus first on political renewal, drafting a new constitution, holding elections, and creating political institutions. Doing so has left the economy

moribund—and the country with a broken social contract. For many Tunisians, the new regime has not delivered the dignity they demanded in 2010, and as a result, the public distrusts the new democratic institutions. But trying to fix the economy before taking on the challenge of political reform could have backfired, too. There was no guarantee that once the economy improved, transitional leaders would have remained committed to democratic reform. Ultimately, economic challenges are inevitable during democratic transitions, and the only viable solution may be for outsiders to provide a stronger safety net through loan guarantees, budget support, and foreign direct investment in the hope of maintaining public support for democracy.

Tunisia is a beacon of hope for pro-democracy movements across the Middle East, but even for the region's many autocrats, the country's successful democratic transition is more than just a cautionary tale—for there are worse fortunes they could face. Ben Ali's forced retirement in Saudi Arabia may not strike them as enviable—but it must certainly seem preferable to the fates of some who refused to bow out, be it death at the hands of insurgents (Libya's Muammar al-Qaddafi); seeing one's country be plunged into years of civil war, devastation, and economic disaster (Syria's Bashar al-Assad); or both (Yemen's Ali Abdullah Saleh). These divergent fortunes will loom large in the minds of rulers if they are faced with mass protests today. As for the region's many activists, Tunisia offers a safe haven that is far more accessible than Europe or the United States—and an example of Arab democracy to emulate. 🌐

# ESSAYS



*The idea that humanity is  
past the era of war is  
based on flawed measures.*  
— Tanisha Fazal  
and Paul Poast

|                                                                                   |     |                                                                              |     |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----|------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----|
| <b>War Is Not Over</b><br><i>Tanisha M. Fazal and Paul Poast</i>                  | 74  | <b>Nowhere to Go</b><br><i>Alexander Betts</i>                               | 122 |
| <b>The Nonintervention Delusion</b><br><i>Richard Fontaine</i>                    | 84  | <b>Let Russia Be Russia</b><br><i>Thomas Graham</i>                          | 134 |
| <b>The Unwinnable Trade War</b><br><i>Weijian Shan</i>                            | 99  | <b>Beyond Great Forces</b><br><i>Daniel Byman and<br/>Kenneth M. Pollack</i> | 148 |
| <b>The Progressive Case Against<br/>Protectionism</b><br><i>Kimberly Clausing</i> | 109 |                                                                              |     |



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# War Is Not Over

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## What the Optimists Get Wrong About Conflict

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*Tanisha M. Fazal and Paul Poast*

**T**he political turmoil of recent years has largely disabused us of the notion that the world has reached some sort of utopian “end of history.” And yet it can still seem that ours is an unprecedented era of peace and progress. On the whole, humans today are living safer and more prosperous lives than their ancestors did. They suffer less cruelty and arbitrary violence. Above all, they seem far less likely to go to war. The incidence of war has been decreasing steadily, a growing consensus holds, with war between great powers becoming all but unthinkable and all types of war becoming more and more rare.

This optimistic narrative has influential backers in academia and politics. At the start of this decade, the Harvard psychologist Steven Pinker devoted a voluminous book, *The Better Angels of Our Nature*, to the decrease of war and violence in modern times. Statistic after statistic pointed to the same conclusion: looked at from a high enough vantage point, violence is in decline after centuries of carnage, reshaping every aspect of our lives “from the waging of wars to the spanking of children.”

Pinker is not alone. “Our international order,” U.S. President Barack Obama told the United Nations in 2016, “has been so successful that we take it as a given that great powers no longer fight world wars, that the end of the Cold War lifted the shadow of nuclear Armageddon, that the battlefields of Europe have been replaced by peaceful union.” At the time of this writing, even the Syrian civil war is winding down. There have been talks to end the nearly two decades of war in Afghan-

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**TANISHA M. FAZAL** is Associate Professor of Political Science at the University of Minnesota.

**PAUL POAST** is Associate Professor of Political Science at the University of Chicago and a Nonresident Fellow at the Chicago Council on Global Affairs.

istan. A landmark prisoner swap between Russia and Ukraine has revived hopes of a peace agreement between the two. The better angels of our nature seem to be winning.

If this sounds too good to be true, it probably is. Such optimism is built on shaky foundations. The idea that humanity is past the era of war is based on flawed measures of war and peace; if anything, the right indicators point to the worrying opposite conclusion. And the anarchic nature of international politics means that the possibility of another major conflagration is ever present.

## BODY COUNTS

The notion that war is in terminal decline is based, at its core, on two insights. First, far fewer people die in battle nowadays than in the past, both in absolute terms and as a percentage of the world population. Experts at the Peace Research Institute Oslo pointed this out in 2005, but it was Pinker who introduced the point to a wider audience in his 2011 book. Reviewing centuries of statistics on war fatalities, he argued that not only is war between states on the decline; so are civil wars, genocides, and terrorism. He attributes this fall to the rise of democracy, trade, and a general belief that war has become illegitimate.

Then there is the fact that there has not been a world war since 1945. “The world is now in the endgame of a five-century-long trajectory toward permanent peace and prosperity,” the political scientist Michael Mousseau wrote in an article in *International Security* earlier this year. The political scientist Joshua Goldstein and the legal scholars Oona Hathaway and Scott Shapiro have also argued as much, tying the decline of interstate war and conquest to the expansion of market economies, the advent of peacekeeping, and international agreements outlawing wars of aggression.

Taken together, these two points—fewer and fewer battle deaths and no more continent-spanning wars—form a picture of a world increasingly at peace. Unfortunately, both rest on faulty statistics and distort our understanding of what counts as war.

To begin with, relying on body counts to determine if armed conflict is decreasing is highly problematic. Dramatic improvements in military medicine have lowered the risk of dying in battle by leaps and bounds, even in high-intensity fighting. For centuries, the ratio of those wounded to those killed in battle held steady at three to one; the wounded-to-killed ratio for the U.S. military today is closer to ten to

one. Many other militaries have seen similar increases, meaning that today's soldiers are far more likely to wind up injured than dead. That historical trend undermines the validity of most existing counts of war and, by extension, belies the argument that war has become a rare occurrence. Although reliable statistics on the war wounded for all countries at war are hard to come by, our best projections cut by half the decline in war casualties that Pinker has posited. What's more, to focus only on the dead means ignoring war's massive costs both for the wounded themselves and for the societies that have to care for them.

Consider one of the most widely used databases of armed conflict: that of the Correlates of War project. Since its founding in the 1960s, *cow* has required that to be considered a war, a conflict must generate a minimum of 1,000 battle-related fatalities among all the organized armed actors involved. Over the two centuries of war that *cow* covers, however, medical advances have drastically changed who lives and who dies in battle. Paintings of wounded military personnel being carried away on stretchers have given way to photographs of medevac helicopters that can transfer the wounded to a medical facility in under one hour—the “golden hour,” when the chances of survival are the highest. Once the wounded are on the operating table, antibiotics, antiseptics, blood typing, and the ability to transfuse patients all make surgeries far more likely to be successful today. Personal protective equipment has evolved, too. In the early nineteenth century, soldiers wore dress uniforms that were often cumbersome without affording any protection against gunshots or artillery. World War I saw the first proper helmets; flak jackets became common in the Vietnam War. Today, soldiers wear helmets that act as shields and radio sets in one. Over the course of the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq alone, medical improvements have decreased the number of deaths from improvised explosive devices and small-arms fire. As a result of these changes, many contemporary wars listed in *cow*'s database appear less intense. Some might not make it past *cow*'s fatality threshold and would therefore be excluded.

Better sanitation has left its mark, too, especially improvements in cleanliness, food distribution, and water purification. During the American Civil War, physicians often failed to wash their hands and instruments between patients. Today's doctors know about germs and proper hygiene. A six-week campaign during the Spanish-American War of 1898 led to just 293 casualties, fatal and nonfatal, from fighting

but a staggering 3,681 from various illnesses. This was no outlier. In the Russo-Turkish War of 1877–78, nearly 80 percent of the deaths were caused by disease. Because counting and categorizing casualties in a war is notoriously difficult, these statistics should be taken with a grain of salt, but they illustrate a broader point: as sanitation has improved, so has the survivability of war. The health of soldiers also skews battle deaths, since ill soldiers are more likely to die in battle than healthier soldiers. And military units fighting at their full complement will have higher survival rates than those decimated by disease.

Moreover, some of the advances that have made modern war less deadly, although no less violent, are more reversible than they seem. Many depend on the ability to quickly fly the wounded to a hospital. For the U.S. military, doing so was possible in the asymmetric conflicts against insurgents in Afghanistan and Iraq, where the United States had almost total control of the skies. In a great-power war, however, airpower would be distributed much more equally, limiting both sides' ability to evacuate their wounded via air. Even a conflict between the United States and North Korea would severely test U.S. medevac capabilities, shifting more casualties from the "nonfatal" to the "fatal" column. And a great-power war could involve chemical, biological, radiological, or nuclear weapons, which have been used so rarely that there are no good medical models for treating their victims.

Skeptics may point out that most wars since World War II have been civil wars, whose parties might not actually have had access to sophisticated medical facilities and procedures—meaning that the decline in casualties is more real than artifice. Although this is true for many rebel groups, civil wars also typically involve state militaries, which do invest in modern military medicine. And the proliferation of aid and development organizations since 1945 has made many of these advances available, at least to some extent, to civilian populations and insurgents. A foundational principle of humanitarian organizations such as the International Committee of the Red Cross is impartiality, meaning that they do not discriminate between civilians and combatants in giving aid. In addition, rebel groups often have external supporters who provide them with casualty-reducing equipment. (The United Kingdom, for example, shipped body armor to the insurgent Free Syrian Army at the start of the Syrian civil war.) As a result, even databases that include civil wars and use a much lower fatality threshold than *cow*, such as the widely referenced database of



the Uppsala Conflict Data Program, may end up giving the erroneous impression that civil wars have become less prevalent when in fact they have become less lethal.

Collecting exact data on the injured in civil wars is admittedly difficult. As a recent report by the nongovernmental organization Action on

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*War has not become any less prevalent; it has only become less lethal.*

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Armed Violence argues, fewer resources for journalists and increased attacks on aid workers mean that those most likely to report on the wounded are less able to do so today than in the past, leading to a likely undercounting. Dubious statistics thus come out

of conflicts such as the Syrian civil war, with media reports suggesting a wounded-to-killed ratio of nearly one to one since 2011. But common sense suggests that the real number of injuries is far higher.

If one ignores these trends and takes the existing databases at face value, the picture is still far from rosy. The tracker managed by the Uppsala Conflict Data Program shows that even according to existing databases that may undercount conflict, the number of active armed conflicts has been ticking up in recent years, and in 2016, it reached its highest point since the end of World War II. And many of today's conflicts are lasting longer than past conflicts did. Recent spikes of violence in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Mexico, and Yemen show few signs of abating.

To be sure, the decline of battle deaths, when considered on its own, is a major victory for human welfare. But that achievement is reversible. As the political scientist Bear Braumoeller pointed out in his book *Only the Dead*, the wars of recent decades may have remained relatively small in size, but there is little reason to expect that trend to continue indefinitely. One need only recall that in the years preceding World War I, Europe was presumed to be in a "long peace." Neither brief flashes of hostility between European powers, such as the standoff between French and German forces in Morocco in 1911, nor the Balkan Wars of 1912 and 1913 could dispel this notion. Yet these small conflicts turned out to be harbingers of a much more devastating conflagration.

Today, the long shadow of nuclear weapons ostensibly keeps that scenario from repeating. Humanity has stockpiles of nuclear warheads that could wipe out billions of lives, and that terrifying fact, many argue, has kept great-power clashes from boiling over into all-out

wars. But the idea that military technology has so altered the dynamics of conflict as to make war inconceivable is not new. In the 1899 book *Is War Now Impossible?*, the Polish financier and military theorist Jan Gotlib Bloch posited that “the improved deadliness of weapons” meant that “before long you will see they will never fight at all.” And in 1938—just a year before Hitler invaded Poland, and several years before nuclear technology was considered feasible—the American peace advocate Lola Maverick Lloyd warned that “the new miracles of science and technology enable us at last to bring our world some measure of unity; if our generation does not use them for construction, they will be misused to destroy it and all its slowly-won civilization of the past in a new and terrible warfare.”

It may be that nuclear weapons truly have more deterrent potential than past military innovations—and yet these weapons have introduced new ways that states could stumble into a cataclysmic conflict. The United States, for example, keeps its missiles on a “launch on warning” status, meaning that it would launch its missiles on receiving word that an enemy nuclear attack was in progress. That approach is certainly safer than a policy of preemption (whereby the mere belief that an adversary’s strike was imminent would be enough to trigger a U.S. strike). But by keeping nuclear weapons ready to use at a moment’s notice, the current policy still creates the possibility of an accidental launch, perhaps driven by human error or a technical malfunction.

### **SMALL GREAT WARS**

All in all, recent history does not point to a decline of war at large. But what about war between great powers? The historian John Lewis Gaddis famously referred to the post-1945 era as “the long peace.” Deterred by nuclear weapons and locked into a global network of international institutions, great powers have avoided a repeat of the carnage of the two world wars. When the European Union was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 2012, it was in part for this remarkable achievement.

There has, indeed, not been a World War III. But that does not necessarily mean the age of great-power peace is here. In truth, the last century’s world wars are a poor yardstick, as they bore little resemblance to most of the great-power wars that preceded them. The 1859 Franco-Austrian War lasted less than three months; the 1866 Austro-Prussian War was a little over one month long. Each produced fewer

than 50,000 battle deaths. Even the 1870–71 Franco-Prussian War, which paved the way for a unified German empire, lasted just six months and resulted in about 200,000 battle deaths. The world wars were orders of magnitude different from those conflicts. World War I was over four years long and produced some nine million battle deaths. World War II lasted six years and led to over 16 million battle deaths.

In other words, World War I and II have severely skewed our sense of what war is. Scholars and policymakers tend to view these conflicts as emblematic of war. They are not. Most wars are relatively short, lasting less than six months. They tend to result in 50 or fewer battle deaths per day—a number that pales in comparison to the figures produced during World War I (over 5,000 dead per day) and World War II (over 7,000 per day). In fact, if one excludes these two outliers, the rates of battle deaths from the mid-nineteenth century until 1914 are consistent with those in the decades since 1945.

There have, in fact, been a number of great-power wars since 1945. But they are rarely recognized as such because they did not look like the two world wars. They include the Korean War, in which the United States faced off against forces from China and the Soviet Union, and the Vietnam War, which also pitted the United States against Chinese forces. In both cases, major powers fought each other directly.

The list of recent great-power conflicts grows much longer if one includes instances of proxy warfare. From U.S. support for the mujahideen fighting Soviet forces in Afghanistan during the Cold War to the foreign rivalries playing out in Syria and Ukraine, major powers

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*It is far from certain that today's wars will remain as small as they have been since 1945.*

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regularly fight one another using the military labor of others. Outsourcing manpower like this is no recent invention and is in fact a relatively normal feature of great-power war. Consider Napoleon's march to Russia in 1812. The invasion is famous for the attrition suffered by the

Grande Armée as it pushed east. Far less known is that despite its immense size of over 400,000 men, the force was largely not French. Foreign fighters, be they mercenaries or recruits from conquered territories, made up the overall majority of the troops that set off to invade Russia. (Many of them soon tired of marching in the summer heat and abandoned the coalition, shrinking Napoleon's forces by

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more than half before he was yet one-quarter of the way through the campaign.) Still, his reliance on foreign troops allowed Napoleon to place the burden of the fighting on non-French, and he reportedly told the Austrian statesman Klemens von Metternich that “the French cannot complain of me; to spare them, I have sacrificed the Germans and the Poles.”

Put simply, most violent conflicts, even among great powers, do not look like World War I or II. This is not at all to diminish the importance of those two wars. Understanding how they happened can help avoid future wars or at least limit their scale. But to determine if great-power war is in decline requires a clear conceptual understanding of what such a war is: one that recognizes that World War I and II were unparalleled in scale and scope but not the last instances of great-power conflict—far from it. The behavior of states has not necessarily improved. In truth, the apparent decline in the deadliness of war masks a great deal of belligerent behavior.

### **DON'T CELEBRATE TOO EARLY**

The idea that war is increasingly a thing of the past is not just mistaken; it also enables a harmful brand of triumphalism. War's ostensible decline does not mean that peace is breaking out. Certainly, the citizens of El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, and Venezuela would object to the notion that their countries are peaceful, even though none is technically at war. As the sociologist Johan Galtung has argued, true peace, or “positive peace,” must also contain elements of active engagement and cooperation, and although globalization since the end of the Cold War has linked disparate communities together, there have also been setbacks. Following the collapse of the Berlin Wall, there were fewer than ten border walls in the world. Today, there are over 70, from the fortified U.S.-Mexican border to the fences separating Hungary and Serbia and those between Botswana and Zimbabwe.

Even when ongoing wars do come to an end, caution is warranted. Consider civil wars, many of which now end in peace treaties. Some, such as the 2016 Colombian peace deal, are elaborate and ambitious documents that run over 300 pages long and go far beyond standard disarmament processes to address land reform, drug policy, and women's rights. And yet civil wars that end with peace agreements tend to sink back into armed conflict sooner than those that end without them. Often, what looks to the international community as an orderly

end to a conflict is just a means for the warring parties to retrench and regroup before fighting breaks out anew.

Likewise, it strains credulity that the better angels of our nature are winning when humanity is armed to the teeth. Global military expenditures are higher today than during the late Cold War era, even when adjusted for inflation. Given that countries haven't laid down their arms, it may well be that today's states are neither more civilized nor inherently peaceful but simply exercising effective deterrence. That raises the same specter as the existence of nuclear weapons: deterrence may hold, but there is a real possibility that it will fail.

### **FEAR IS GOOD**

The greatest danger, however, lies not in a misplaced sense of progress but in complacency—what U.S. Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg, in a different context, called “throwing away your umbrella in a rainstorm because you are not getting wet.” At a time of U.S.-Russian proxy wars in Syria and Ukraine, rising tensions between the United States and Iran, and an increasingly assertive China, underestimating the risk of future war could lead to fatal mistakes. New technologies, such as unmanned drones and cyberweapons, heighten this danger, as there is no consensus around how states should respond to their use.

Above all, overconfidence about the decline of war may lead states to underestimate how dangerously and quickly any clashes can escalate, with potentially disastrous consequences. It would not be the first time: the European powers that started World War I all set out to wage limited preventive wars, only to be locked into a regional conflagration. In fact, as the historian A. J. P. Taylor observed, “every war between Great Powers . . . started as a preventive war, not a war of conquest.”

A false sense of security could lead today's leaders to repeat those mistakes. That danger is all the more present in an era of populist leaders who disregard expert advice from diplomats, intelligence communities, and scholars in favor of sound bites. The gutting of the U.S. State Department under President Donald Trump and Trump's dismissive attitude toward the U.S. intelligence community are but two examples of a larger global trend. The long-term consequences of such behavior are likely to be profound. Repeated enough, the claim that war is in decline could become a self-defeating prophecy, as political leaders engage in bombastic rhetoric, military spectacles, and counterproductive wall building in ways that increase the risk of war. 🌐

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# The Nonintervention Delusion

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## What War Is Good For

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*Richard Fontaine*

**A**s the casualties and financial costs of the United States' Middle Eastern wars have mounted, Americans' appetite for new interventions—and their commitment to existing ones—has understandably diminished. The conventional wisdom now holds that the next phase in the United States' global life should be marked by military restraint, allowing Washington to focus on other pressing issues. This position seems to be one of the few principles uniting actors as diverse as foreign policy realists, progressives, nearly all of the presidential candidates in the 2020 Democratic primary, and President Donald Trump.

It's not hard to see why Americans would look at U.S. military involvement in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Libya and conclude that such interventions should never be repeated. The costs of these wars have been extraordinary: at a rally in Ohio in April 2018, Trump estimated them at \$7 trillion over 17 years and concluded that the country has nothing to show for the effort "except death and destruction." Although the precise financial cost depends on how one counts, what is certain is that more than 4,500 U.S. military personnel have been killed in Iraq and nearly 2,500 in Afghanistan, plus tens of thousands injured in both wars—to say nothing of the casualties among allied forces, military contractors, and local civilians. Critics of these resource-intensive operations blame them for bogging down the United States in a region of second-tier importance and distracting Washington from the greater threats of China and Russia, as well as from pressing domestic issues.

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**RICHARD FONTAINE** is CEO of the Center for a New American Security. He has worked at the U.S. State Department, at the National Security Council, and as a foreign policy adviser for U.S. Senator John McCain.

With the costs so high, and the benefits seen as low, the imperative is obvious to political leaders in both parties: get out of the existing conflicts in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Syria and avoid starting new ones. In his State of the Union address this year, Trump declared that “great nations do not fight endless wars.” Scores of House Democrats have signed a pledge to “end the forever war,” referring to the global war on terrorism and U.S. military involvement in Afghanistan, Iraq, Jordan, Niger, Somalia, Syria, Thailand, and Yemen, as have many of the Democrats running for president. Joe Biden, the former vice president and current presidential candidate, has also promised to “end the forever wars.” He has described the Obama administration’s withdrawal of U.S. troops from Iraq as “one of the proudest moments of [his] life” and has called for pulling U.S. forces out of Afghanistan.

Many experts are of a similar mind. Discussions of “offshore balancing,” a strategy in which the United States would dramatically scale back its global military presence and reduce the frequency of its interventions, were once mostly confined to the halls of academia, but today the idea is garnering new attention.

Faced with such a sweeping political consensus, one might conclude that Washington should simply get on with it and embrace restraint. The problem is that such a strategy overlooks the interests and values that have prompted U.S. action in the first place and that may for good reasons give rise to it in the future. The consensus also neglects the fact that, despite the well-known failures of recent large-scale interventions, there is also a record of more successful ones—including the effort underway today in Syria.

To assume that nonintervention will become a central tenet of future U.S. foreign policy will, if anything, induce Americans to think less seriously about the country’s military operations abroad and thus generate not only less successful intervention but possibly even more of it. Instead of settling into wishful thinking, policymakers should accept that the use of military force will remain an essential tool of U.S. strategy. That, in turn, requires applying the right lessons from recent decades.

## **GOODBYE TO ALL THAT?**

The first sign that the sweeping consensus around “ending endless war” is more problematic than it first appears is the telling set of caveats that emerges even among its most ardent advocates. Consider the many qualifications that Democratic presidential candidates are



applying to a withdrawal from Afghanistan. Biden has said that he would bring U.S. combat troops home during his first term but that he remains open to a “residual presence” to conduct counterterrorism operations—roughly the same approach as Trump’s. Senator Cory Booker of New Jersey has promised that as president he would immediately begin a “process” to withdraw troops from Afghanistan, while somehow ensuring that the country does not again become a safe haven for terrorists. Pete Buttigieg, the mayor of South Bend, Indiana, who served as a naval officer in Afghanistan, has agreed that “it’s time to end this endless war,” and yet he envisions a peace agreement that keeps U.S. special operations forces and intelligence operatives there. Such concessions, responsible policy though they are, stop well short of terminating the United States’ longest war.

Even the most committed anti-interventionists continue to come up with exceptions. The foreign policy manifesto of Senator Bernie Sanders of Vermont, published in *Foreign Affairs* in June, is titled “Ending America’s Endless War,” and yet he has acknowledged that “military force is sometimes necessary, but always—always—as the last resort.” His foreign policy adviser has emphasized Sanders’ commitment to collective defense among NATO allies and has said that genocide and mass atrocities would “weigh heavily” on Sanders when contemplating military action. Advocates of offshore balancing, such as the scholar John Mearsheimer, favor using force if a regional balance of power is breaking down, and Mearsheimer has written that his approach would not preclude operations to halt genocides like the one that befell Rwanda in 1994.

Even at a rhetorical and intellectual level, then, the end of intervention is not nearly as clear-cut as today’s politicians suggest. The reality of being commander in chief complicates things further: on the campaign trail, Bill Clinton, George W. Bush, Barack Obama, and Trump each pledged to engage in fewer foreign military adventures and redirect resources toward needs at home. In office, each reluctantly proceeded to not only continue existing wars but also launch new offensives.

The result is that, according to a Congressional Research Service estimate, the United States has employed military force over 200 times since the end of the Cold War. Many of these operations have taken place in or around the Middle East, including in Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, Somalia, Syria, and Yemen. But other, less frequently recalled interventions have occurred elsewhere, as in Bosnia, Colombia, Haiti, Kosovo, Liberia, and the Philippines. What’s more, the



*Paved with good intentions: Bernie Sanders at a rally in Michigan, April 2019*

tendency to intervene is not simply the product of the United States' emergence as an unbridled superpower after the Cold War. Between 1948 and 1991, during a time of supposedly stabilizing bipolar competition, the United States sent its military to fight abroad more than 50 times. American military action is not, as many believe, a feature of post-Cold War overstretch; it has been a central element of the United States' approach to the world for decades.

### **THE CASE AGAINST**

Just because the United States has intervened so frequently over its history does not mean that it will continue to do so or that it should. The case against intervention generally takes five forms. And although there are elements of truth to each, they also threaten to obscure other, more complicated realities.

The first argument holds that the United States need not employ military means in response to terrorism, civil wars, mass atrocities, and other problems that are not its business. Washington has used force against terrorists in countries ranging from Niger to Pakistan, with massive human and financial expenditures. And yet if more Americans die in their bathtubs each year than in terrorist attacks, why no war on porcelain? The post-9/11 overreach, this camp contends,

endures some 18 years later, having stretched well beyond eradicating the original al Qaeda perpetrators and their Afghan base. In this view, as the threats have diminished, so should American attention. The civil wars in Libya, Syria, and Yemen may be tragic, but they do not demand a U.S. military response any more than did the atrocities in Rwanda, eastern Congo, or Darfur.

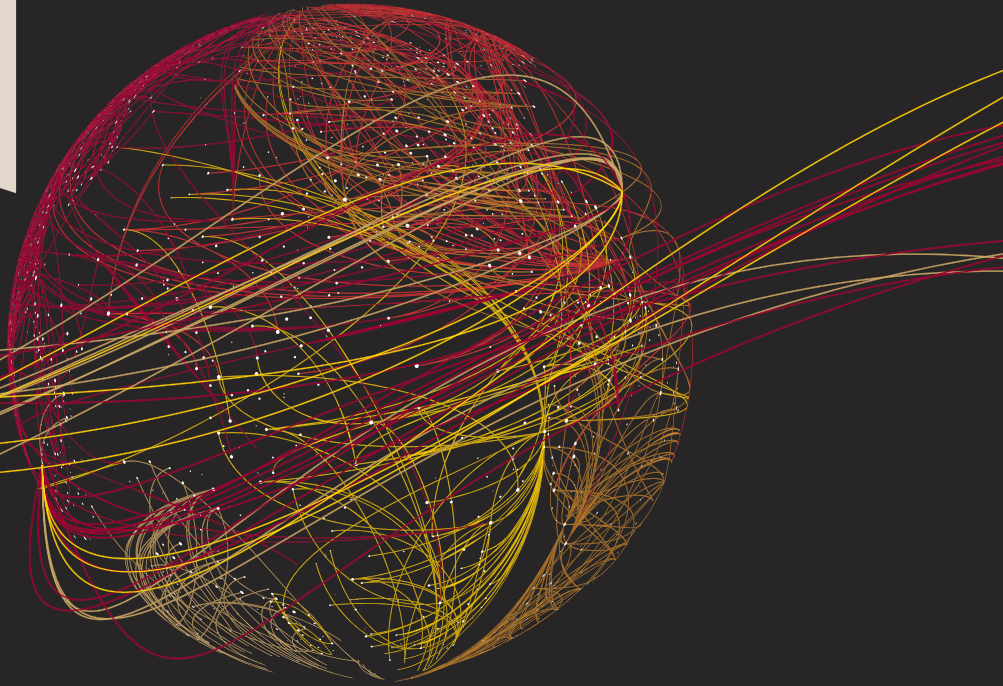
Adopting such a cramped view of American interests, however, carries its own costs. Terrorism remains a threat, and the effect of successful attacks on Americans goes beyond their immediate casualties to include increased pressure to restrict civil liberties at home and wage impromptu operations abroad—operations that end up being costlier and less effective than longer-term, better-planned ones would be. After the Islamic State (or ISIS) took hold in Iraq and Syria and footage of terrorists decapitating American hostages horrified the public, Obama undertook a far larger operation than would have likely been necessary had he left a residual force in Iraq after 2011. As for genocide and civil war, certain cases can pose such serious threats to U.S. interests, or be so offensive to American values, as to merit intervention. Successive presidents have used military might to prevent, halt, or punish mass atrocities—Clinton to cease the genocide against Bosnian Muslims in the Balkans, Obama to protect the Yezidi minority in Iraq, and Trump after Bashar al-Assad's chemical attacks against his own people in Syria. There is every reason to believe that similar cases will arise in the future.

The second argument against intervention highlights its supposedly poor track record. For all of the United States' good intentions—stopping terrorists, ending genocide, stabilizing countries, spreading democracy—Washington simply is not very successful in its attempts. Iraq and Libya look worse today than when the wars against Saddam Hussein and Muammar al-Qaddafi began, and the Taliban currently control more of Afghanistan than at any time since 2001. Long gone are U.S. aspirations to turn these countries into democracies that would radiate liberalism beyond their borders.

Yet this argument ignores the many other times in which the use of American force worked. It ejected Saddam from Kuwait, it ended a war in Bosnia, it stopped ethnic cleansing in Kosovo, it paved the way for a democratic transition in Liberia, and it helped defeat narcoterrorists and bring temporary peace to Colombia. Even in Afghanistan, it should not be forgotten that Washington denied al Qaeda a safe haven, and in Iraq and Syria, it eliminated ISIS' physical presence,



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limited the flow of foreign fighters, and liberated cities from depravity. Then there are other, harder-to-measure effects of U.S. intervention, such as enforcing norms against ethnic cleansing and deterring countries from offering terrorists sanctuary or engaging in wars of aggression. To get an accurate picture of intervention's mixed track record, one cannot cherry-pick the disastrous cases or the successful ones.

The third argument against intervention points to the slippery slope involved in such efforts: start a military campaign, and the United States will never get out. After the 1995 Dayton peace accords formally ended the ethnic conflict in Bosnia, U.S. troops stayed in the area for ten years, and NATO retains a presence in Kosovo to this day. The United States seems to be stuck in Afghanistan, too, because without a peace deal with the Taliban, the U.S.-backed government could fall. In Iraq, Obama removed all U.S. troops, only to send them back in when ISIS established a vast presence there. Check in to a military intervention, and it often seems like you can never leave.

Once deployed, American troops often do stay a long time. But staying is not the same as fighting, and it is wrong to think of troops who are largely advising local forces the same way as one thinks about those who are actively engaged in combat. There is a stark difference between what it meant to have U.S. forces in Iraq during the peak of the war and what it means to have U.S. troops there now to train Iraqi forces—just as there is a massive gulf between deploying troops to Afghanistan during the troop surge there and keeping a residual presence to strengthen the government and its security forces. Some American interests are worth the price of continued military deployments, and the aim should be to diminish those costs in blood and treasure as the conditions stabilize. Even once they do, there may remain a case for an enduring role, particularly when the U.S. troop presence is the only thing maintaining the domestic political equilibrium, as was the case in Iraq before the 2011 withdrawal and as is true in Afghanistan today.

The fourth argument can be boiled down to the plea, "Why us?" Why must the United States always run to the sound of the guns, especially when other countries are capable of taking on such burdens and may have more skin in the game? Europe is geographically closer to Libya and Syria, at far greater risk from terrorism and refugee flows, and possesses capable military forces of its own. Middle Eastern allies have their own resources, too. The American role might not be so indispensable after all.

For all the contributions of U.S. partners, however, more often than not, only the United States has the will and the capability to lead successful military operations. France led a successful operation in Côte d'Ivoire in 2004 and in Mali in 2013, and the United Kingdom led one in Sierra Leone in 2000, but those were exceptions. Iraq would not have left Kuwait in 1991 had the United States not led the effort; mass slaughter in the Balkans during the 1990s would not have ended without a dominant U.S. role, even though it took place on European soil. In Afghanistan and Syria, U.S. allies have made it clear that they will stay as long as the United States does but will head for the exit otherwise. U.S. friends in Europe have proved decidedly uninterested in taking matters into their own hands, and when Washington has declined to meaningfully intervene itself, they have often stood idly by. In Libya after Qaddafi's fall, the Europeans failed to impose security even as growing numbers of refugees and migrants set sail across the Mediterranean. In Syria before U.S. bombing began, they undertook no military campaign against ISIS, even as the arrival of Syrian refugees destabilized European politics. When U.S. allies do take matters into their own hands, they can make a bad situation worse. Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates decided to intervene in Yemen's civil war, but their brutal and indiscriminate campaign led to a humanitarian disaster and strengthened the very Iranian role it sought to eliminate.

The final reason most frequently offered for getting out of the intervention business relates to its costs, both direct ones—the lives lost and damaged, the dollars borrowed and spent—and opportunity costs. It is increasingly clear that China and Russia represent the foremost challenge to the United States over the long term and that the competition with them has begun in earnest. If that's the case, why tie up scarce resources in less important military interventions?

Here, too, a dose of subtlety is in order. The prospect of great-power competition should indeed structure the United States' coming approach to national security, but a focus on counterterrorism is required, as well. After all, the George W. Bush administration entered office hoping to focus on China, only to see its best-laid plans upended by the 9/11 attacks. Withdrawing prematurely from terrorist safe havens such as Afghanistan, Iraq, and Syria would threaten the great-power emphasis necessary in the next phase of the United States' global life. A major terrorist attack on U.S. soil, for instance,

would likely cause Washington to once again embrace counterterrorism as its chief national security priority, leaving it more vulnerable to threats from China and Russia. Unless the United States chooses to give up its global role and instead focus only on Asia and Europe, it must engage in great-power competition while attending to other security challenges in other areas.

### **A SUBTLER STRATEGY**

Every possible intervention, past and future, raises difficult what-ifs. If presented again with a situation like that in Rwanda in 1994—800,000 lives in peril and the possibility that a modest foreign military effort could make a difference—would the United States once again avoid acting? Should it have stayed out of the bloodbath in the Balkans or intervened earlier to prevent greater carnage? Should it have left Qaddafi to attack Benghazi? Pursued al Qaeda after the 1998 attacks on the U.S. embassies in Kenya and Tanzania, perhaps obviating the need to overthrow the Taliban three years later?

In such discussions, the gravitational pull of the Iraq war bends the light around it, and for obvious reasons. The war there has been so searing, so badly bungled, and so catastrophically costly that, according to former Secretary of Defense Robert Gates, anyone thinking of a similar engagement “should ‘have his head examined,’ as General MacArthur so delicately put it.” Almost everything that could go wrong in Iraq did. What started as a war to eliminate weapons of mass destruction found none. The impulse to liberate the Iraqi people from tyranny pushed them into a civil war. The desire to open another front in the war on terrorism created far more terrorists than it eliminated. A war that some U.S. officials promised would be a “cakewalk” exacted an unbearable toll on U.S. troops, their families, and the Iraqi people themselves.

Ironically, many among Washington’s political and national security elite, especially on the Republican side, were for years unable to admit publicly that the invasion was the mistake it so clearly was. After the 2003 invasion, politics and a resistance to suggesting that American sacrifices were in vain kept such observations private. Republican political leaders’ failure to admit that the war’s costs exceeded its benefits undermined their credibility, which was already tarnished by their general support for the war in the first place. That, in turn, may have helped usher in the blunt anti-interventionism so prevalent today. Washington needs a subtler alternative to it.

U.S. military interventions take diverse forms—an isolated drone strike in a remote area of Pakistan is as different from a theoretical future war with China as is possible to contemplate. As a result, there are no precise rules about when leaders should and should not use force. Context matters, and human judgment always comes into play. Yet it is possible to sketch out several principles, informed by the experience of recent decades, that should guide the general conduct of U.S. decision-making.

The first guideline is to avoid overlearning the supposed lessons of past interventions. It's often said that generals are always fighting the last war, and the same can be said of policymakers. Sometimes, they draw the right lessons, but sometimes, they do not. President Harry Truman sent troops north of the 38th parallel in Korea, drawing China into the Korean War, so in Vietnam, U.S. ground forces remained on their side of the demilitarized zone—which put enormous emphasis on extensive bombing campaigns against the North. Hoping to avoid a Vietnam-style quagmire, when the George H. W. Bush administration fought the Gulf War, it sought to limit its objective to the specific aim of restoring Kuwaiti sovereignty. But because Saddam was left in power, the Iraq problem festered. The second Iraq war was supposed to finish the job—but it showed how a purportedly short conflict can lead to an indefinite occupation. To prevent that from happening in Libya, Obama decided to use airpower to help oust Qaddafi but keep American boots off the ground; he was thus unable to contain the chaos that followed. And so in Syria, Obama and Trump would fight terrorists without attempting to remove Assad. Sticking to rigid lines based on prior errors can easily lead to new and different pitfalls.

Another guideline is to pick interventions that meet clear conditions and commit to those that are chosen. The United States should generally undertake interventions only when political leaders—namely, the president and a majority of Congress—believe that force is necessary to attain a clearly stated objective. They should have a reasonable expectation that allies, especially those in the region in question, will join the effort, and they should make serious efforts to enlist them. They should conclude that the benefits of a military intervention over the long run are reasonably expected to exceed the costs. And they should undertake military interventions in which they are prepared for the possibility that U.S. forces will have to stay for a long time, indefinitely if necessary.



Guidelines such as these cannot possibly supply all the answers policymakers might need, but they can point to the right questions. Requiring decision-makers to clearly define the objectives of the possible intervention, for example, will force them to distinguish between managing a problem (such as preventing Afghanistan from becoming a terrorist safe haven) and solving it (such as rendering that country a Taliban-free modern democracy). Enlisting allies in the effort should involve an honest assessment of their strengths and weaknesses, whether those allies are someone in the nature of Afghan President Hamid Karzai, or exiles in Iraq, or European troops in Libya, or the Syrian Democratic Forces. And the judgment about an operation's likely costs and benefits should include an analysis of the success or failure of various approaches in the past, such as targeted counterterrorism operations or a full-fledged counterinsurgency campaign.

One traditional way of thinking about intervention is represented by the Powell Doctrine, developed by General Colin Powell during the Gulf War, which emphasizes the importance of using decisive force, having a clear exit strategy, and mobilizing U.S. public support. But the opposite has proved at least equally important in recent wars: there will be cases in which the employment of modest force over an open-ended timeline will be the better strategy. Policymakers' general unwillingness to contemplate a long-term U.S. presence in a foreign country, along with their tendency to see conflicts as temporary problems that can be solved in a limited period of time, often makes them rush for the exits when the going gets tough. Had the United States not frantically sought an off-ramp in both Afghanistan and Iraq, for instance, its prospects for success in both conflicts would have been brighter—and, paradoxically, the wars might have ended sooner. Even many years after the initiation of those conflicts, sustainable, low-cost, and long-term American engagement is preferable to unconditional withdrawal.

A new set of guidelines would also take a more nuanced approach to determining whether an intervention is politically sustainable. The usual model holds that presidents should paint a picture of the threat for Americans and then elicit their support for war, hoping to wind down operations before the public grows weary of the conflict. Yet political support hinges less on a war's duration than it does on its financial costs, casualties, and perceived progress. Reducing losses and making concrete steps toward a conflict's stated objective are critical to maintaining popular support over the long run. Instead of



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suggesting that ultimate success is just around the corner, policymakers should articulate the case for an enduring engagement and then work to lower the human and financial costs associated with it.

Perhaps the most difficult guideline is to rigorously estimate the long-term costs and benefits. Although the need to run a cost-benefit analysis seems patently obvious, recent experience suggests that it is not. In the run-up to the Iraq war, for example, U.S. leaders minimized the estimated cost of troops and reconstruction aid and wildly overinflated their projections of success. During the deliberation over intervention in Libya, it appears that policymakers ignored the lesson that would-be nuclear proliferators might draw in watching the United States topple a leader who had previously turned over his weapons of mass destruction. Most important is an examination of the specific case itself, including the history of the people and the forces at play. Analogies to past wars and unrelated historical experiences, or aspirations to abstract principles—such as needing to be on the right side of history—add little value.

### **FROM THEORY TO PRACTICE**

Applying these guidelines would rule some past and potential interventions in and others out. Intervention in the Balkans and Rwanda likely would have passed the test, particularly given the limited objectives (in the Balkans, an end to atrocities without toppling governments) and the military means required (in Rwanda, reinforcing UN peacekeepers already on the ground or jamming radio broadcasts). The 2001 decision to attack al Qaeda and the Taliban in Afghanistan would have met the mark, too, as would have the anti-ISIS campaign in Iraq and Syria, given that nonmilitary approaches were unable to shut down the safe havens. The 2003 Iraq war would not have met the test, given a realistic projection of the costs and benefits and the ever-changing objectives. In Libya, these principles would have led Washington to either mount a limited operation to stop a massacre in Benghazi and leave Qaddafi in power or stay out of the fight altogether. Instead, the Obama administration chose to topple the regime and then disengage.

For the ongoing interventions in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Syria, the guidelines would rule in favor of a residual, indefinite troop presence. Preventing these countries from regressing into terrorist hubs and, in the cases of Afghanistan and Iraq, supporting the governments that keep them from doing so are objectives that merit continued

U.S. engagement. Additionally, the costs of redeploying to these countries after a descent into terror-ridden chaos—as happened in Iraq after 2011—would almost certainly be higher than the costs of remaining. Simply ignoring the emergence of terrorist sanctuaries could be even more catastrophic.

Several practical changes would help policymakers evaluate possible military interventions. To ensure that cost-benefit analyses are as accurate as possible, for example, they must be based on the entire range of possible costs down the line—not just the expected casualties and direct expenses associated with operations but also those of contractors and intelligence personnel, as well as longer-term costs, such as veterans' care. They should also include the likely effect of military action on civilians living in the country in question and the likely effect of military inaction on the U.S. population.

Congress must also play a role far beyond its power of the purse and its ability to authorize force. For all the focus on the outdated 2001 Authorization for Use of Military Force, which permitted the use of U.S. military force against the perpetrators of 9/11, legislators would do better to concentrate on the conduct of the wars themselves. That means investigating on-the-ground conditions, measuring progress, interrogating policymakers and military leaders, and offering alternative strategies. To do that, Congress would have to use the full panoply of its informal powers to engage in oversight: conducting hearings and briefings, sending congressional delegations, initiating investigations, and so on.

Ironically, it is the counter-ISIS mission in Syria—the one that so frequently elicits calls for its end—that provides a reasonably successful example of how U.S. military intervention can work in practice. With the deployment of roughly 2,000 special operations forces, the United States armed, trained, and advised up to 70,000 local Arab and Kurdish fighters. The operation has banished Iran, Russia, and Syrian government forces from a third of the country, eliminated ISIS' physical caliphate and forestalled its resurgence, deterred a Kurdish-Turkish clash, and kept refugee flows in check. U.S. casualties and financial expenditures have been relatively low, and international support relatively high: fewer than ten U.S. troops have lost their lives in Syria, and

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*It's often said that generals are always fighting the last war, and the same can be said of policymakers.*

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U.S. operations there compose only a fraction of the \$15 billion budget for Operation Inherent Resolve, as the military campaign against ISIS in Iraq and Syria is known. Such financial costs are significant, and the human losses tragic, but there is reason to believe that they will be much lower in the future, given the elimination of ISIS' physical caliphate.

Still, Washington could cut yet more costs by allowing more regular troops to relieve the burden placed on elite special operations forces. Over time, it could reallocate expensive military equipment—such as F-35 and F-22 aircraft—to arenas of great-power competition and instead invest in cheaper aircraft for anti-ISIS bombings in Iraq and Syria. Doing so would free up resources for missions in other regions and reduce the financial burden. If calls for disengagement from Syria prevail, however, it is likely that conditions on the ground will eventually deteriorate, and the United States may once again have to deploy ground forces to prevent the reemergence of a terrorist stronghold.

### **THE PERILS OF PREDICTION**

Ultimately, the unpredictability of world events puts a priority on human judgment and undermines rigid formulas. That is precisely why it is so unwise for 2020 presidential candidates to make categorical commitments to end the United States' involvement in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Syria and why it is unwise for Trump to focus on an exit to those conflicts rather than the right conditions that would safely enable one. This uncertainty is also a reason why voters must place a priority on the judgment of their would-be leaders.

Amid all the justified frustration with the United States' post-Cold War approach and pledges to dial back intervention and end forever wars, far more subtlety is needed when it comes to considering if, when, and how the United States should use force abroad. No grand strategy can be built on the presumption that military intervention is mostly an erroneous activity of yesteryear, rather than an enduring feature of U.S. foreign policy.

Now, as the world enters its post-post-Cold War phase, Americans need to do some hard thinking. Their country remains a global power, with strongly held interests and values that require defending. The United States need not look abroad for monsters to destroy. But it must not lull itself into believing that such monsters have disappeared. 🌐

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# The Unwinnable Trade War

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## Everyone Loses in the U.S.-Chinese Clash—but Especially Americans

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*Weijian Shan*

**I**n late June, the leaders of China and the United States announced at the G-20 meeting in Osaka, Japan, that they had reached a *détente* in their trade war. U.S. President Donald Trump claimed that the two sides had set negotiations “back on track.” He put on hold new tariffs on Chinese goods and lifted restrictions preventing U.S. companies from selling to Huawei, the blacklisted Chinese telecommunications giant. Markets rallied, and media reports hailed the move as a “cease-fire.”

That supposed cease-fire was a false dawn, one of many that have marked the on-again, off-again diplomacy between Beijing and Washington. All wasn’t quiet on the trade front; the guns never stopped blazing. In September, after a summer of heated rhetoric, the Trump administration increased tariffs on another \$125 billion worth of Chinese imports. China responded by issuing tariffs on an additional \$75 billion worth of U.S. goods. The United States might institute further tariffs in December, bringing the total value of Chinese goods subject to punitive tariffs to over half a trillion dollars, covering almost all Chinese imports. China’s retaliation is expected to cover 69 percent of its imports from the United States. If all the threatened hikes are put in place, the average tariff rate on U.S. imports of Chinese goods will be about 24 percent, up from about three percent two years ago, and that on Chinese imports of U.S. goods will be at nearly 26 percent, compared with China’s average tariff rate of 6.7 percent for all other countries.

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**WEIJIAN SHAN** is Chair and CEO of PAG, a Hong Kong-based private equity firm, and the author of *Out of the Gobi: My Story of China and America*. This article is part of a project of the Library of Congress’ John W. Kluge Center, supported by the Carnegie Corporation of New York.

The parties to this trade war may yet step back from the abyss. There have been over a dozen rounds of high-level negotiations without any real prospect of a settlement. Trump thinks that tariffs will convince China to cave in and change its allegedly unfair trade practices. China may be willing to budge on some issues, such as buying more U.S. goods, opening its market further to U.S. companies, and improving intellectual property protection, in exchange for the removal of all new tariffs, but not to the extent demanded by the Trump administration. Meanwhile, China hopes that its retaliatory actions will cause enough economic pain in the United States to make Washington reconsider its stance.

The numbers suggest that Washington is not winning this trade war. Although China's economic growth has slowed, the tariffs have hit U.S. consumers harder than their Chinese counterparts. With fears of a recession around the corner, Trump must reckon with the fact that his current approach is imperiling the U.S. economy, posing a threat to the international trading system, and failing to reduce the trade deficit that he loathes.

Trump may back away from his self-destructive policy toward China, but U.S.-Chinese competition will continue beyond his tenure as president. Much of the coverage of the conflict makes it seem like a clash of personalities, the capriciousness of Trump against the implacable will of Chinese President Xi Jinping and the Chinese Communist Party. But this friction is systemic. The current costs of the trade war reflect the structural realities that underpin the relationship between the U.S. and Chinese economies. It's worth tracing that dynamic as the two great powers try to find a new, fitful equilibrium in the years ahead.

## **CONSIDER THE LOBSTERS**

The trade war has not produced the desired results for the United States. Washington first raised tariffs on Chinese imports in 2018. In the same year, Chinese exports to the United States increased by \$34 billion, or seven percent, year-over-year, while U.S. exports to China decreased by \$10 billion, or eight percent. In the first eight months of this year, China's exports to the United States dropped by just under four percent compared with the same period in the previous year, but U.S. exports to China shrank much more, by nearly 24 percent. Instead of narrowing the trade gap, the tariffs have coincided with a



*Paying the price: at a Black Friday sale in Niles, Illinois, November 2018*

widening of the U.S. trade deficit with China: by nearly 12 percent in 2018 (to \$420 billion) and by about another eight percent in the first eight months of this year.

There are at least two reasons why Chinese exports to the United States have not fallen as much as the Trump administration hoped they would. One is that there are no good substitutes for many of the products the United States imports from China, such as iPhones and consumer drones, so U.S. buyers are forced to absorb the tariffs in the form of higher prices. The other reason is that despite recent headlines, much of the manufacturing of U.S.-bound goods isn't leaving China anytime soon, since many companies depend on supply chains that exist only there. (In 2012, Apple attempted to move manufacturing of its high-end Mac Pro computer from China to Texas, but the difficulty of sourcing the tiny screws that hold it together prevented the relocation.)

Some export-oriented manufacturing is leaving China, but not for the United States. According to a May survey conducted by the Amer-



ican Chamber of Commerce in Shanghai, fewer than six percent of U.S. businesses in China plan to return home. Sixty percent of U.S. companies said they would stay in China.

The damage to the economy on the import side is even more pronounced for the United States than it is for China. Economists at the Federal Reserve Bank of New York and elsewhere found that in 2018, the tariffs did not compel Chinese exporters to reduce their prices; instead, the full cost of the tariffs hit American consumers. As tariffs raise the prices of goods imported from China, U.S. consumers will opt to buy substitutes (when available) from other countries, which may be more expensive than the original Chinese imports but are cheaper than those same goods after the tariffs. The price difference between the pre-tariff Chinese imports and these third-country substitutes constitutes what economists call a “dead-weight loss” to the economy.

Economists reckon the dead-weight loss arising from the existing tariffs on \$200 billion in Chinese imports to be \$620 per household, or about \$80 billion, annually. This represents about 0.4 percent of U.S. GDP. If the United States continues to expand its tariff regime as scheduled, that loss will more than double.

Meanwhile, Chinese consumers aren’t paying higher prices for U.S. imports. A study by the Peterson Institute for International Economics shows that since the beginning of 2018, China has raised

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*Much of the manufacturing of U.S.-bound goods isn’t leaving China anytime soon.*

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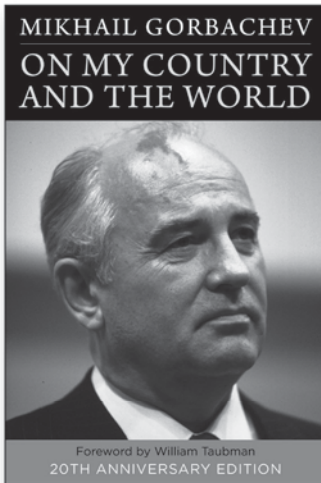
the average tariff rate on U.S. imports from 8.0 percent to 21.8 percent and has lowered the average tariff rate on all its other trading partners from 8.0 percent to 6.7 percent. China imposed tariffs only on U.S. commodities that can be replaced with imports from

other countries at similar prices. It actually lowered duties for those U.S. products that can’t be bought elsewhere more cheaply, such as semiconductors and pharmaceuticals. Consequently, China’s import prices for the same products have dropped overall, in spite of higher tariffs on U.S. imports.

Beijing’s nimble calculations are well illustrated by the example of lobsters. China imposed a 25 percent tariff on U.S. lobsters in July 2018, precipitating a 70 percent drop in U.S. lobster exports. At the same time, Beijing cut tariffs on Canadian lobsters by three percent,



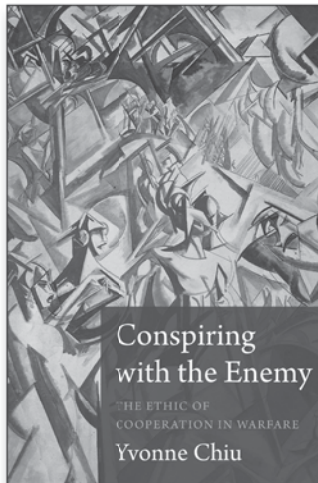
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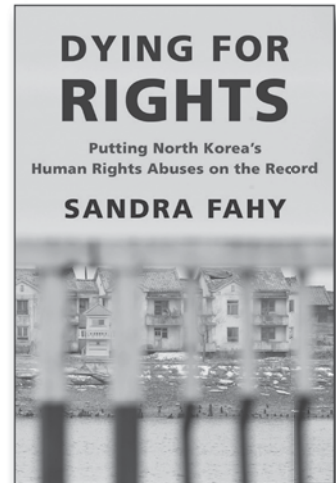
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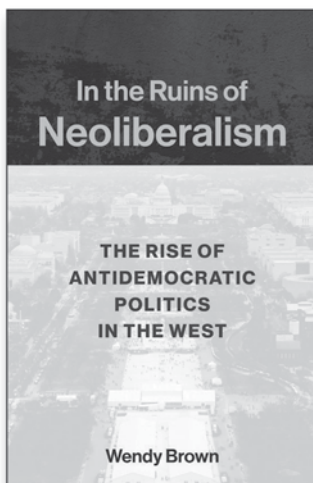


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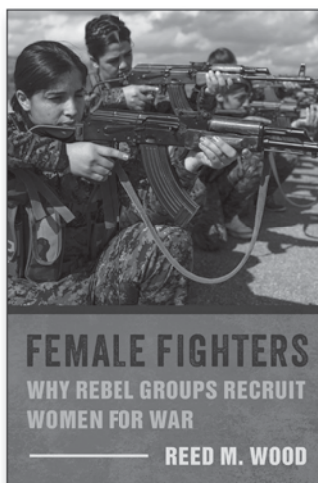


In the Ruins  
of Neoliberalism

*The Rise of Antidemocratic Politics*

*in the West*

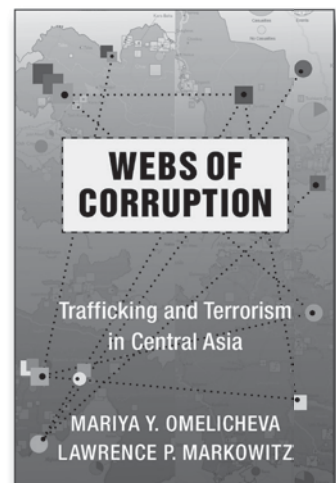
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*Why Rebel Groups Recruit Women for War*

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and as a result, Canadian lobster exports to China doubled. Chinese consumers now pay less for lobsters imported from essentially the same waters.

### **THE INESCAPABLE DEFICIT**

Beijing has proved much more capable than Washington of minimizing the pain to its consumers and economy. But the trade war would be more palatable for Washington if its confrontation with China were accomplishing Trump's goals. The president thinks that China is "ripping off" the United States. He wants to reduce the United States' overall trade deficit by changing China's trade practices. But levying tariffs on Chinese imports has had the paradoxical effect of inflating the United States' overall trade deficit, which, according to the U.S. Census Bureau, rose by \$28 billion in the first seven months of this year compared with the same period last year.

The uncomfortable truth for Trump is that U.S. trade deficits don't spring from the practices of U.S. trading partners; they come from the United States' own spending habits. The United States has run a persistent trade deficit since 1975, both overall and with most of its trading partners. Over the past 20 years, U.S. domestic expenditures have always exceeded GDP, resulting in negative net exports, or a trade deficit. The shortfall has shifted over time but has remained between three and six percent of GDP. Trump wants to boost U.S. exports to trim the deficit, but trade wars inevitably invite retaliation that leads to significant reductions in exports. Moreover, increasing the volume of exports does not necessarily reduce trade deficits unless it is accompanied by a reduction in the country's spending in terms of consumption and investment. The right way to reduce a trade deficit is to grow the economy faster than concurrent domestic expenditures, which can be accomplished only by encouraging innovation and increasing productivity. A trade war does the opposite, damaging the economy, impeding growth, and hindering innovation.

Even a total Chinese capitulation in the trade war wouldn't make a dent in the overall U.S. trade deficit. If China buys more from the United States, it will purchase less from other countries, which will then sell the difference either to the United States or to its competitors. For example, look at aircraft sales by the U.S. firm Boeing and its European rival, Airbus. At the moment, both companies are operating at full capacity. If China buys 1,000 more aircraft from Boeing and 1,000 fewer from Airbus, the European plane-maker will still sell those

1,000 aircraft, just to the United States or to other countries that might have bought instead from Boeing. China understands this, which is one reason it hasn't put higher tariffs on U.S.-made aircraft. Whatever the outcome of the trade war, the deficit won't be greatly changed.

## **A RESILIENT CHINA**

The trade war has not really damaged China so far, largely because Beijing has managed to keep import prices from rising and because its exports to the United States have been less affected than anticipated. This pattern will change as U.S. importers begin to switch from buying from China to buying from third countries to avoid paying the high tariffs. But assuming China's GDP continues to grow at around five to six percent every year, the effect of that change will be quite modest. Some pundits doubt the accuracy of Chinese figures for economic growth, but multilateral agencies and independent research institutions set Chinese GDP growth within a range of five to six percent.

Skeptics also miss the bigger picture that China's economy is slowing down as it shifts to a consumption-driven model. Some manufacturing will leave China if the high tariffs become permanent, but the significance of such a development should not be overstated. Independent of the anxiety bred by Trump's tariffs, China is gradually weaning itself off its dependence on export-led growth. Exports to the United States as a proportion of China's GDP steadily declined from a peak of 11 percent in 2005 to less than four percent by 2018. In 2006, total exports made up 36 percent of China's GDP; by 2018, that figure had been cut by half, to 18 percent, which is much lower than the average of 29 percent for the industrialized countries of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development. Chinese leaders have long sought to steer their economy away from export-driven manufacturing to a consumer-driven model.

To be sure, the trade war has exacted a severe psychological toll on the Chinese economy. In 2018, when the tariffs were first announced, they caused a near panic in China's market at a time when growth was slowing thanks to a round of credit tightening. The stock market took a beating, plummeting some 25 percent. The government initially felt pressured to find a way out of the trade war quickly. But as the smoke cleared to reveal little real damage, confidence in the market rebounded: stock indexes had risen by 23 percent and 34 percent on the Shanghai and Shenzhen exchanges, respectively, by September 12, 2019.



The resilience of the Chinese economy in the face of the trade war helps explain why Beijing has stiffened its negotiating position in spite of Trump's escalation.

China hasn't had a recession in the past 40 years and won't have one in the foreseeable future, because its economy is still at an early stage of development, with per capita GDP only one-sixth of that of the United States. Due to declining rates of saving and rising wages, the engine of China's economy is shifting from investments and exports to private consumption. As a result, the country's growth

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*Chinese leaders have long sought to steer their economy toward a consumer-driven model.*

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rate is expected to slow. The International Monetary Fund projects that China's real GDP growth will fall from 6.6 percent in 2018 to 5.5 percent in 2024; other estimates put the growth rate at an even lower number. Although the rate of Chinese growth may dip, there is little risk that the

Chinese economy will contract in the foreseeable future. Private consumption, which has been increasing, representing 35 percent of GDP in 2010 and 39 percent last year, is expected to continue to rise and to drive economic growth, especially now that China has expanded its social safety net and welfare provisions, freeing up private savings for consumption.

The U.S. economy, on the other hand, has had the longest expansion in history, and the inevitable down cycle is already on the horizon: second-quarter GDP growth this year dropped to 2.0 percent from the first quarter's 3.1 percent. The trade war, without taking into account the escalations from September, will shave off at least half a percentage point of U.S. GDP, and that much of a drag on the economy may tip it into the anticipated downturn. (According to a September *Washington Post* poll, 60 percent of Americans expect a recession in 2020.) The prospect of a recession could provide Trump with the impetus to call off the trade war. Here, then, is one plausible way the trade war will come to an end. Americans aren't uniformly feeling the pain of the tariffs yet. But a turning point is likely to come when the economy starts to lose steam.

If the trade war continues, it will compromise the international trading system, which relies on a global division of labor based on each country's comparative advantage. Once that system becomes less

dependable—when disrupted, for instance, by the boycotts and hostility of trade wars—countries will start decoupling from one another.

China and the United States are joined at the hip economically, each being the other's biggest trading partner. Any attempt to decouple the two economies will bring catastrophic consequences for both, and for the world at large. Consumer prices will rise, world economic growth will slow, supply chains will be disrupted and laboriously duplicated on a global scale, and a digital divide—in technology, the Internet, and telecommunications—will vastly hamper innovation by limiting the horizons and ambitions of technology firms.

### **SILVER LININGS**

Trump's trade war does not seem to simply seek to reduce the trade deficit. Rather, his administration sees the tariffs as a means to slow China's economic rise and check the growing power of a geopolitical competitor. At the heart of this gambit is the notion that China's system of government involvement in economic activities represents a unique threat to the United States. Robert Lighthizer, the U.S. trade representative, has insisted that the purpose of the tariffs is to spur China to overhaul its way of doing business.

Ironically, it is China's private sector that has been hardest hit by the trade war, as it accounts for 90 percent of Chinese exports (43 percent of which are from foreign-owned firms). If the trade war persists, it will weaken the private sector. China may well agree to commit to purchasing large quantities of U.S. goods as part of a settlement. But such purchases can be made only by the government, not by the private sector. The United States should recognize that securing such a commitment would basically compel the Chinese government to remain a large presence in economic affairs. The trade policy of the Trump administration threatens to undermine its own stated objectives.

U.S. officials should reconsider their analysis of the Chinese economy. To think that there is a unique "China model" of economic development, which represents an alternative and a threat to liberal market systems, is ahistorical nonsense. China has achieved rapid growth in the past 40 years by moving away from the old system of state control of the economy and embracing the market. Today, the market plays a dominant role in resource allocation, and the private sector accounts for more than two-thirds of the economy.

However, the government-controlled sector remains too big, inefficient, wasteful, and moribund, more of a bane than a boon to the economy. It is also a source of growing friction between China and the West, which fears, with good reason, that Chinese government subsidies and support unfairly advantage state-owned firms. This arrangement needs to change, both for China and for its trading partners.

China can maintain its economic momentum only by structurally reforming its economy to move in the direction of a freer, more open market. If it fails to do so, its growth will hit a ceiling and its rise will be curtailed. U.S. negotiators should push China to further trim its state-owned sector, to guarantee equal access to its market for trade and investment, and to develop a better regime of intellectual property protection. These measures would accelerate the trajectory of reform that China embarked on 40 years ago, which has led to the rise of a vibrant private sector in China and the country's economic integration with the global market. Speeding up this process will not be painless and will be resisted by vested interests in China. But such changes will benefit China as well as its trading partners, including the United States. Beijing and Washington should share these objectives in their trade negotiations. If they succeed in meeting these goals, both sides will win the trade war.

It is in the best interests of both countries to move away from zero-sum thinking and put an end to the ad hoc decoupling that the trade war has threatened. The best path forward is not to close but to tear down existing barriers and further open up trade. To maintain its global primacy and technological leadership, the United States needs China—the biggest and fastest-growing consumer market in the world. To sustain the momentum of its economic ascent, China needs to further its reforms and continue opening up to the world market. Ultimately, a mix of cooperation and competition within a rules-based system will lead to the greatest prosperity for both countries and for the world economy, as all trading nations have learned throughout history. 🌐

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# The Progressive Case Against Protectionism

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## How Trade and Immigration Help American Workers

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*Kimberly Clausing*

**I**t has almost become the new Washington consensus: decades of growing economic openness have hurt American workers, increased inequality, and gutted the middle class, and new restrictions on trade and immigration can work to reverse the damage. This view is a near reversal of the bipartisan consensus in favor of openness to the world that defined U.S. economic policy for decades. From the end of World War II on, under both Democratic and Republican control, Congress and the White House consistently favored free trade and relatively unrestrictive immigration policies. Candidates would make protectionist noises to appease various constituencies from time to time, but by and large, such rhetoric was confined to the margins. Almost never did it translate into actual policy.

Then came the 2016 presidential election. Donald Trump found a wide audience when he identified the chief enemy of the American worker as foreigners: trading partners that had struck disastrous trade agreements with Washington and immigrants who were taking jobs from native-born Americans. Everyday workers, Trump alleged, had been let down by a political class beholden to globalist economic ideas. In office, he has followed through on his nationalist agenda, withdrawing the United States from the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) and routinely levying higher tariffs on trading partners. On immigration, he has implemented draconian policies against asylum

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**KIMBERLY CLAUSING** is Thormund A. Miller and Walter Mintz Professor of Economics at Reed College and the author of *Open: The Progressive Case for Free Trade, Immigration, and Global Capital*.



seekers at the border and undocumented immigrants within the United States, as well as reducing quotas for legal immigrants and slowing down the processing of their applications.

But Trump has not been alone in his battle against economic openness. During the 2016 campaign, he was joined in his calls for protectionism by the Democratic primary candidate Bernie Sanders, who also blamed bad trade agreements for the plight of the American worker. Even the Democratic nominee, Hillary Clinton, who as secretary of state had championed the TPP, was forced by political necessity to abandon her earlier support for the agreement. Democrats have not, fortunately, mimicked Trump's anti-immigrant rhetoric, but when it comes to free trade, their support has often been lukewarm at best. While some Democrats have criticized Trump's counterproductive tariffs and disruptive trade wars, many of them hesitate when asked if they would repudiate the administration's trade policies, especially with respect to China. The political winds have shifted; now, it seems as if those who purport to sympathize with workers and stand up for the middle class must also question the merits of economic openness.

American workers have indeed been left behind, but open economic policies remain in their best interest: by reducing prices for consumers and companies, free trade helps workers more than it hurts them, and by creating jobs, offering complementary skills, and paying taxes, so do immigrants. Instead of hawking discredited nationalist economic ideas, politicians seeking to improve Americans' economic lot—especially progressives focused on reducing inequality and rebuilding the middle class—should be looking to domestic policy to address workers' needs, while also improving trade agreements and increasing immigration. That, not tariffs and walls, is what it will take to improve the plight of regular Americans.

## **THE TRADE BOOGEYMAN**

Forty years of widening inequality and slow wage growth have left many Americans searching for answers. It may be tempting, then, to blame the United States' trading partners, many of which have experienced remarkable jumps in GDP and wages. China, perhaps the most spectacular example, saw its GDP per capita expand more than 22-fold from 1980 to 2018—in terms of 2010 U.S. dollars, from \$350 to \$7,750. Yet during the same period, U.S. GDP per capita grew from \$28,600

to \$54,500. That's less in relative terms—advanced economies usually grow more slowly than poor ones—but far more in absolute terms, and enough to significantly boost standards of living.

The problem, however, is that the gains have not been evenly shared. Adjusted for inflation, the average income of the bottom 50 percent of earners stayed nearly flat between 1980 and 2014. For those in the 50th to 90th percentiles, it grew by about 40 percent, lagging far behind expectations based on the experience of prior generations. Among the top one percent, meanwhile, average income has skyrocketed, ballooning by 205 percent over the same period. No wonder so many Americans are disappointed. The U.S. economy has failed to achieve its most basic aim: generating inclusive growth.

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*American workers have indeed been left behind, but open economic policies remain in their best interest.*

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Trade does deserve some of the blame. When the United States buys goods from labor-abundant countries such as China and India, the demand for domestic labor falls. This appears to be what happened after the big surge in Chinese imports to the United States in the early years of this century. In a series of oft-cited research papers about “the China shock,” the economists David Autor, David Dorn, and Gordon Hanson estimated that trade with China may have displaced the jobs of one million to two million Americans during this period. But it's important to keep those numbers in perspective. The U.S. economy is a dynamic place, with more than six million jobs lost and created every single quarter. Moreover, the share of Americans working in manufacturing has been declining steadily since 1950, even as growth in trade has waxed and waned—suggesting that factors other than trade are also at play.

Indeed, the U.S. economy has experienced other huge changes. Workers have lost bargaining power as unionization has declined (from 30 percent of the labor force in 1960 to less than 11 percent today) and large companies have steadily increased their market power (corporate profits as a share of GDP are 50 percent higher than they were in prior decades). Perhaps most important, technology has disrupted countless industries and lowered the demand for less educated labor. Most economists believe that technological change is a far more important factor than international trade in explaining the

disappointing outcomes in American labor markets. Across all industries, the returns to education have increased, as less educated workers are disproportionately displaced by automation and computerization. And although manufacturing output continues to rise, manufacturing employment has fallen, as capital takes the place of labor and workers steadily move into the service industry. Yet in spite of all this evidence about the effects of technological change, politicians still point fingers at foreigners.

### **THE MYTH OF BAD DEALS**

Critics of trade on both the left and the right contend that much of the problem has to do with bad trade deals that Washington has struck. On the left, the concern is that trade agreements have prioritized the interests of corporations over those of workers. On the right, it is that trade agreements have focused on the goal of international cooperation at the expense of U.S. interests. Trump has argued that U.S. trade deals have been tilted against the United States, contributing to the large trade deficit (meaning that the country imports more than it exports) and hollowing out the manufacturing sector. Sanders has echoed these concerns in the past, for example, claiming that the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) cost 43,000 jobs in Michigan and is behind Detroit's urban decline.

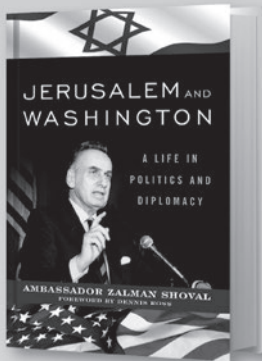
But just as trade in general is not to blame for the woes of the American worker, neither are the specifics of individual trade deals. In fact, the terms of trade agreements are typically highly favorable to the United States. That's because such deals usually require U.S. trading partners to lower their trade barriers far more than the United States must, since Washington tends to start off with much lower trade barriers. Such was certainly the case with Mexico, which, prior to NAFTA, had tariffs that averaged ten percent, compared with U.S. tariffs that averaged two percent.

This is not to say that trade agreements cannot be improved; useful tweaks could counter the excessive prioritization of intellectual property and reduce the reach of the mechanism by which investors and states resolve disputes, which critics allege gives companies too much power to fight health and environmental regulations. The TPP attempted to modernize NAFTA by placing a greater emphasis on the rights of workers and protecting the environment, and future agreements could go even further.

**ZALMAN SHOVAL**

**From British-ruled Palestine to  
Israel's ambassador to the U.S.**

Foreword by Dennis Ross



"In the various functions he fulfilled, Ambassador Shoval made many important contributions to the State of Israel, and especially as Israel's Ambassador to Washington. There are not many people who have carried out this important and critical position as successfully as he did; actually, in my view nobody has."

**—Benjamin Netanyahu, prime minister  
of Israel**

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That said, it is easy to overstate the stakes here. Even ideal trade agreements would do little to address economic inequality and wage stagnation, because trade agreements themselves have little to do with those problems. Compared with other factors—the growth of trade in general, technological change, the decline of unionization, and so on—the details of trade agreements are nearly inconsequential. In fact, in the late 1990s, just after the adoption of NAFTA, the United States saw some of the strongest wage growth in four decades. As studies by researchers at the Congressional Research Service and the Peterson Institute for International Economics have shown, any disruption to the labor market caused by NAFTA was dwarfed by other considerations, especially technological change. And even when trade has cost jobs, as with the China shock, the effect did not depend on the particulars of any trade deal. There was and is no U.S. trade agreement with China, just the “most favored nation” status the country was granted when it joined the World Trade Organization in 2001—a status that it would have been hard to deny China, given the country’s massive and growing economy. What really mattered was the mere fact of China’s emergence as an economic powerhouse.

Critics of trade are also dead wrong when they argue that U.S. agreements have expanded the trade deficit. In fact, it’s the result of borrowing. As economists have long understood, trade deficits emerge whenever a country spends more than it earns, and trade surpluses arise whenever a country earns more than it spends. Trade deficits and surpluses are simply the flip side of international borrowing and lending. Some countries, such as the United States, are borrowers. They consume more of others’ goods than they send abroad, and they pay the difference in IOUs (which take the form of foreign investment in U.S. stocks, bonds, and real estate). Other countries, such as Germany, are lenders. They loan money abroad, accruing foreign assets, but receive less in imports than they send in exports. Which country is getting the better end of the deal? It is hard to say. U.S. households enjoy consuming more now, but they will eventually have to repay the debt; German households get returns on their investments abroad, but they forgo consumption in the present.

What this means is that if policymakers wish to reduce the U.S. trade deficit—and for now, it is not alarmingly large—they should reduce borrowing, which they can accomplish by shrinking the budget



*The price is right: in a supermarket in Baltimore, Maryland, July 2018*

deficit. Instead, policymakers are moving in the opposite direction: the budget deficit has swelled in recent years, especially after the 2017 tax cuts. The new U.S. tariffs, meanwhile, have done nothing to improve the trade deficit. That came as no surprise to economists.

## **THE PRICE OF PROTECTIONISM**

As easily debunked as these myths about trade are, they clearly have a powerful hold on policymakers. That is troubling not merely for what it reflects about the state of public discourse; it also has profound real-world implications. As they lambast trade, politicians are increasingly reaching for protectionist policies. Yet for American workers, such measures only add insult to injury, making their lives even more precarious. They do so in four distinct ways.

First and foremost, tariffs act as regressive taxes on consumption. Although the Trump administration likes to claim that foreigners pay the price of tariffs, in truth, the costs are passed along to consumers, who must pay more for the imports they buy. (By this past spring, the cost of the trade war that began in 2018 exceeded \$400 per year for the average U.S. household.) Beyond that, tariffs fall disproportionately on the poor, both because the poor consume more

of their income and because a higher share of their spending goes to heavily tariffed products, such as food and clothing. That is one reason why progressives in the early twentieth century, outraged by the inequality of the Gilded Age, pushed for moving away from tariffs and toward a federal income tax: it was widely recognized that tariffs largely spared the rich at the expense of the poor. Now, the reverse is happening. After having championed tax cuts that disproportionately benefited well-off Americans, the administration has tried to collect more revenue from regressive taxes on trade.

Second, tariffs and trade wars wreak havoc in U.S. labor markets by raising costs for American companies. Many large U.S. manufacturers are heavily dependent on imports. Boeing is a top U.S. exporter, but it is also a major importer, relying on crucial parts from around the world. General Motors now pays over \$1 billion in annual tariffs, no doubt one factor behind the company's recent decision to shutter a plant in Ohio. When tariffs interrupt global supply chains, they disadvantage U.S. companies relative to foreign ones. If the goal is to make the United States a more internationally competitive place to locate jobs and direct investment, protectionism is a completely backward approach.

Third, trading partners do not sit on their hands when Washington raises tariffs on their products. Already, the Chinese, the Indians, and the Europeans have slapped serious retaliatory tariffs on U.S. goods. The victims of these measures include soybean farmers in Iowa and Minnesota (who have lost market share to Canada as Chinese buyers look elsewhere) and whiskey distillers in Kentucky and Tennessee (who have seen their exports to Europe and elsewhere plummet).

Finally, trade wars harm the global economy and U.S. trading partners, weakening Washington's network of alliances and jeopardizing the cooperation required to deal with pressing international problems. Recent meetings of the G-7 and the G-20 have been dominated by discussions aimed at diffusing trade conflicts, distracting precious diplomatic attention from climate change and nuclear non-proliferation. It is easy to take peace and international cooperation for granted, but they are prerequisites for the success of the U.S. economy in the decades ahead. The world is witnessing another rise in economic nationalism, which makes it easy for politicians and publics to embrace nationalist tendencies in other spheres. It is worth remembering that after the last era of globalization came to a halt, what followed was the Great Depression and World War II.

## **PEOPLE POWER**

Protectionism is harmful for most American workers, but even more destructive are policies that make the United States less welcoming to immigrants. Setting aside the Trump administration's actions against refugees and the undocumented—a serious moral stain on the country—its efforts to limit immigration are also economically harmful.

Immigration has long been an enormous boon for the U.S. economy. Study after study has shown that it is good for economic growth, innovation, entrepreneurship, and job creation and that almost all economic classes within the United States benefit from it. Even though only 14 percent of the current U.S. population is foreign-born, immigrants create a disproportionate number of businesses. Fifty-five percent of the United States' \$1 billion startups were founded or co-founded by immigrants, and more than 40 percent of the Fortune 500 companies were founded or co-founded by immigrants or their children. In recent decades, immigrants have accounted for more than 50 percent of the U.S.-affiliated academics who have won Nobel Prizes in scientific fields.

Immigrants also provide countless skills that complement those of native-born American workers. Highly educated foreigners with technological skills (such as computer programmers) make up for persistent shortages in the U.S. high-tech sector, and they complement native-born workers who have more cultural fluency or communication skills. Less skilled immigrants also fill labor shortages in areas such as agriculture and eldercare, where it is often difficult to find native-born workers willing to take jobs.

There is little evidence that immigration lowers the wages of most native-born workers, although there is some limited evidence that it may cut into the wages or hours of two groups: high school dropouts and prior waves of immigrants. In the case of high school dropouts, however, there are far better ways to help them (such as strengthening the educational system) than restricting immigration. As for prior waves of immigrants, given how substantial their economic gains from migration are—often, they earn large multiples of what they would have made back home—it's hard to justify their subsequent slower wage growth as a policy concern.

Immigrants have another economic benefit: they relieve demographic pressures on public budgets. In many rich countries, population growth has slowed to such an extent that the government's



fiscal burden of caring for the elderly is enormous. In Japan, there are eight retired people for every ten workers; in Italy, there are five retirees for every ten workers. In the United States and Canada, although the budget pressures of an aging population remain, higher immigration levels contribute to a healthier ratio of three retirees for every ten workers. It also helps that recent immigrants have above-average fertility rates.

Many objections to immigration are cultural in nature, and these, too, have little grounding in reality. There is no evidence that immigrants, even undocumented ones, increase crime rates. Nor is there evidence that they refuse to integrate; in fact, they are assimilating faster than previous generations of immigrants did.

Given the many benefits from immigration, greater restrictions on it pose several threats to American workers. Already, the United States is beginning to lose foreign talent, which will hurt economic growth. For two years straight, the number of foreign students studying in U.S. universities has fallen, which is a particular shame since these students disproportionately study science, technology, engineering, and mathematics—areas in which the country faces large skills shortages. Encouraging such students to stay in the country after graduation would help the United States maintain its edge in innovation and promote economic growth. Instead, the Trump administration is discouraging foreign students with visa delays and a constant stream of nationalist rhetoric. Restricting immigration also harms the economy in other ways. It keeps out job creators and people whose skills complement those of native-born workers. And it increases the pressure on the budget, since restrictions will lead to a higher ratio of retirees to workers.

A more sensible immigration policy would make it easier for foreign students to stay in the United States after graduation, admit more immigrants through lotteries, accept more refugees, and provide a compassionate path to citizenship for undocumented immigrants currently living in the United States. Promoting U.S. interests means more immigration, not less.

## **WHAT WORKS**

While reducing trade and immigration damages the prospects of American workers, free trade and increased immigration are not enough to ensure their prosperity. Indeed, despite decades of relative

openness to trade and immigration, wages remain stagnant and inequality high. This has dire implications. As the economist Heather Boushey has argued, inequality undermines the U.S. economy by inhibiting competition and stifling the supply of talent and ideas. Unmet economic expectations also fuel voter discontent and political polarization, making it easy to blame outsiders and embrace counter-productive policies. For the sake of both the country's economy and its politics, economic growth needs to be much more inclusive.

To achieve that, the United States needs, above all, a tax system that ensures that economic prosperity lifts all boats. The Earned Income Tax Credit is a powerful tool in that regard. A credit targeted at lower-income workers that grows as those workers earn more, the EITC subsidizes their work, making each hour of it more lucrative. This credit should be expanded in size, it should reach further up the income distribution, and it should be made more generous for childless workers—

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*Immigration has long been an enormous boon for the U.S. economy.*

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changes that would particularly benefit those lower- and middle-class Americans who have seen their wages stagnate in recent decades. This policy would work well alongside an increase in the federal minimum wage, which would help combat the increased market power of employers relative to employees.

Beyond these steps, the federal government should set up a wage insurance program, which could make up some of the difference in lower wages for workers who have been displaced by foreign competition, technological change, domestic competition, natural disasters, or other forces. The federal government should also make greater investments in infrastructure, education, and research, all of which would benefit workers by increasing their productivity and thus their incomes. And it should strengthen the safety net, making improved health-care access and affordability a top priority.

None of this will be cheap, of course. To raise revenue, the U.S. tax system needs to be modernized. For corporations, Congress should curb international tax avoidance, closing loopholes and reforming minimum taxes so as to raise government revenues without chasing profits offshore. Congress should also strengthen individual and estate taxation, and it can do so without resorting to extreme rates. For the income tax, it can cap or end various deductions and preferences; for

the estate tax, it can raise rates and reduce exceptions. And it can beef up enforcement of both. Congress should also enact a long-overdue carbon tax. Coupled with the other policies, a carbon tax could raise substantial revenue without harming poor and middle-class Americans, and it would fight climate change.

Finally, policymakers need to reckon with corporations' growing market power. They should modernize antitrust laws to put more emphasis on labor and modernize labor laws to suit the nature of work today, making sure that they adequately protect those in the service sector and those in the gig economy. Although large companies are often good for consumers, their market power narrows the share of the economy that ends up in the hands of workers. So the balance of power between companies and their workers needs to be recalibrated from both ends: policies should empower labor movements and combat companies' abuses of market power.

In the end, global markets have many wonderful benefits, but they need to be accompanied by strong domestic policies to ensure that the benefits of international trade (as well as technological change and other forces) are felt by all. Otherwise, economic discontent festers, empowering nationalist politicians who offer easy answers and peddle wrong-headed policies.

American workers have every reason to expect more from the economy, but restrictions on trade and immigration ultimately damage their interests. What those who care about reducing inequality and helping workers must realize, then, is that protectionism and nativism set back their cause. Not only do these policies have direct negative effects; they also distract from more effective policies that go straight to the problem at hand. On both sides of the aisle, it's time for politicians to stop vilifying outsiders and focus instead on policies that actually solve the very real problems afflicting so many Americans. 🌐



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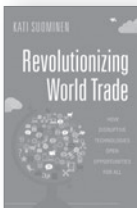
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# Nowhere to Go

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## How Governments in the Americas Are Bungling the Migration Crisis

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*Alexander Betts*

**I**n 2015, over 1.2 million asylum seekers arrived in the European Union. They were fleeing war zones in Afghanistan, South Sudan, and Syria; economic deprivation in Nigeria and Pakistan; and political instability in Somalia. The largest group came across the Aegean Sea; many of them reached European territory in Greece and then made their way to Germany. Others crossed the Mediterranean on rickety, overloaded boats or traversed the Bosphorus, the Dardanelles, or the Gibraltar strait. Politicians and journalists labeled the situation a “crisis” to reflect its unprecedented scale. But this was not a crisis of numbers. It was a crisis of politics. European leaders initially resorted to unilateral, quick-fix solutions. German Chancellor Angela Merkel implemented a short-lived open-border policy. Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban built a razor-wire fence. Other countries sought to accommodate, sequester, or cast out the migrants—mostly to no avail. The human consequences were devastating: over 10,000 people have drowned while crossing the Mediterranean since 2015. Those who made it were greeted not as survivors but as usurpers, free riders, or covert extremists; they soon became scapegoats for the radical right. The political consequences changed Europe forever.

The Western Hemisphere now faces a migration crisis on a similar scale, with consequences that will likely be just as far-reaching. So far, this crisis has received a piecemeal treatment. Central American migrants arriving at the U.S.-Mexican border, Venezuelans crossing dry plains into Colombia, Bolivians seeking work in Argentina and Chile—these are treated as separate phenomena but are in fact part of

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**ALEXANDER BETTS** is Professor of Forced Migration and International Affairs and William Golding Senior Fellow in Politics at Brasenose College, both at the University of Oxford. He is a co-author (with Paul Collier) of *Refuge: Transforming a Broken Refugee System*.



*On the road again: a caravan of migrants from Arriaga, Mexico, October 2018*

the same underlying set of problems. To avoid the kind of human and political toll that the migration crisis produced in Europe, political leaders and policymakers must treat this new situation holistically and learn from past examples. Already, policymakers in the United States and elsewhere in the Americas are repeating European mistakes.

So far this year, the U.S. Border Patrol has apprehended over 800,000 people at the southern border—the highest number in over a decade. The previous peak in apprehensions occurred in 2000 and resulted mainly from “pull” factors, namely, the high demand for cheap labor. Today’s migrants, in contrast, are responding to “push” factors, including many of the same things that inspired masses of people to flee to Europe four years ago: failed or fragile states, violence, and economic insecurity. To contend with the new arrivals, the United States is weighing many of the same approaches that European countries have tried but ultimately found wanting. From border walls to bilateral deals linking immigration to trade and aid, Washington has borrowed directly from a playbook that fell short abroad. For instance, U.S. President Donald Trump’s “Remain in Mexico” policy, requiring migrants hoping to gain asylum in the United States to have their claims assessed while they wait in Mexico, mirrors the EU’s long-standing failed attempts to set up similar systems in Libya and elsewhere.

Despite some differences between the two cases, there are a few strategies that the New World could draw on from the Old World. The key lesson from the European experience of 2015 is that when it comes to migration, there are limits to unilateralism and bilateralism. The sense of crisis began to abate only when the EU adopted a multipronged approach grounded in cooperation among the migrants' countries of origin, transit, and destination.

## SEEING DOUBLE

The European and American crises are alike in a number of ways. The total number of people apprehended at the U.S. border or deemed inadmissible at a U.S. port of entry since October 2018 is now nearly the same as the number of asylum seekers who arrived in Europe in the whole of 2015. Observers on both sides of the Atlantic have also stumbled on eerily similar scenes. The widely published photograph of the bodies of Óscar Martínez and his 23-month-old daughter, Valeria, who drowned while attempting to cross the Rio Grande in June, resembles the picture of Alan Kurdi, a Syrian toddler who drowned while trying to cross the Mediterranean in 2015. Both images have come to symbolize the awful toll of transnational migration in a world of closed borders.

The effects of migration on the European and American political systems are likewise comparable. The rhetoric of xenophobic right-wing figures in the United States echoes—and, in some cases, draws on—the pronouncements of their European counterparts. In Europe, such rhetoric fueled anti-immigrant sentiment and encouraged support for right-wing parties. It has had similar effects in the United States, where rising xenophobia has underwritten the Trump administration's punitive approach to migrants.

There are more parallels between the two crises when it comes to their causes, their consequences, and governments' responses. Both crises resulted from state collapse. In Europe, the immediate trigger was the Syrian civil war. State fragility in Afghanistan and Iraq also contributed to mass displacement, and the chaos in Libya created a transit option and haven for smugglers facilitating movement from sub-Saharan Africa across the Mediterranean. In the Americas, El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras have grown highly unstable in recent years. Guatemala appears on the "high warning" list of the Fragile States Index; Honduras is just one grade below. In these states, governing capacity is low, corruption is high, and organized crime

dominates business, politics, and society. Since the summer of 2018, all three countries have experienced severe drought. Crop failure rates have reached higher than 80 percent; as a result, food insecurity has become a major cause of outmigration. On the opposite side of the Caribbean, Venezuela has crumbled under its president and would-be strongman, Nicolás Maduro. Over four million people have fled the country, the majority bound for Colombia, Ecuador, or Peru, making this the second-largest displacement crisis in the world.

The Americas are also witnessing a human tragedy as dramatic as the one that engulfed Europe in 2015, when more than 3,700 people drowned while crossing the Mediterranean. The number of those dying at the U.S.-Mexican border is considerably smaller—around 400 in the first eight months of this year—but the figure is still significant. What is more, that statistic does not account for the thousands of people who have been subjected to inhumane conditions or have suffered injuries on the journey north. Meanwhile, the fact that the richest country in the world has resorted to indefinitely detaining migrant children signals a lapse in the application of human rights standards similar to what Europe witnessed in 2015.

Europe's initial response to the crisis was characterized by unilateralism rather than international cooperation. In 2015, the 28 EU states struggled to agree on a common response. Merkel's plea for open borders fell on deaf ears, as Austria and Hungary quickly shut their doors. A major source of frustration for northern European states was the sense that southern European states were largely indifferent to the problem, simply waving migrants through in the hope that they would move northward. The Mexican government also stood by when migrant caravans originating in Central America crossed Mexico en route to the United States in late 2018. And just as richer northern European countries were unable to force their southern neighbors to take more responsibility for the problem, Washington's unilateral efforts to bully or bribe Mexico to respond more energetically have come to naught.

Although South American countries have been far more receptive to Venezuelan migrants than their northern neighbors have been to those fleeing Central America, they have similarly struggled to develop standardized responses or mechanisms for regional collaboration. The distribution of migrants across the region is highly uneven: by the end of 2018, there were around 1.3 million in Colombia, 768,000 in Peru, 288,000 in Chile, 263,000 in Ecuador, 168,000 in Brazil, and 130,000



in Argentina. Each of these countries handles work permits, public services, and refugee status differently. In light of the xenophobic backlash in several countries, some governments have put in place deterrence measures similar to those that European states used back in 2015; Ecuador, for instance, has introduced a policy requiring Venezuelans to present their criminal records at the border in response to an upsurge in anti-immigrant violence in late 2018.

### **DITCH THE DICTIONARY**

The crisis in the Americas—like the European one before it—has raised questions about the usefulness of conventional categories such as “refugees” and “economic migrants.” The UN’s 1951 Refugee Convention defined a refugee as someone who has “a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion.” In the 1980 Refugee Act, the U.S. Congress enshrined that description in U.S. law, as well. But the 1951 definition was written to address the upheavals of the early Cold War, especially the emigration of Soviet dissidents. Today, most migrants are not fleeing powerful regimes that are out to get them. Nor are they simply seeking better economic opportunities. Rather, they are running from states that have failed or that are so fragile that life has become difficult to bear for their citizens. What Europe saw in 2015 and what the Americas are witnessing today are not simply refugee flows or market-driven population movements but rather “survival migration”—a term I initially coined to describe the exodus of Zimbabweans from Robert Mugabe’s regime in the early years of this century. Between 2003 and 2010, around two million Zimbabweans fled to South Africa and other neighboring states. Most of them wanted to escape hyperinflation, banditry, and food insecurity—the economic consequences of the underlying political situation—rather than political persecution per se. Because the majority of these migrants could not be described as either refugees or economic migrants, humanitarian action around the crisis stalled.

Many of the migrants who arrived in Europe in 2015, notably those from Syria, were clearly refugees under the 1951 convention. Others—including some Albanians and Kosovars who used the Balkan routes toward Germany alongside the Syrians—were plainly economic migrants. But significant numbers of those crossing the Aegean were fleeing fragile states such as Afghanistan and Iraq. European governments were, by and large, unsure of how to label these migrants. In the first

quarter of this year, 46 percent of Iraqi asylum seekers received recognition in Germany, compared with 13 percent in the United Kingdom. Petitioners from failed or fragile Middle Eastern or sub-Saharan African countries faced—and still face—a sort of recognition lottery whose outcome depends on whether judges and bureaucrats are prepared to shoehorn today's circumstances into Cold War categories. But few European governments wanted to abandon the old terminology and categories. Governments led by right-of-center parties did not want to open themselves up to possibly greater obligations; those led by left-of-center parties did not want to risk jeopardizing the 1951 convention.

A similar dynamic seems to be at work in the Americas today, where outdated notions obscure the reality of survival migration. Nowhere is this truer than in Central America. In the first eight months of this year, around 508,000 people left the so-called Northern Triangle region, which consists of El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras, bound for the United States. This represents almost double the number who made that trip in any single year since 2014, an increase that has played a major role in the dramatic spike in U.S. border apprehensions. Meanwhile, in the past six years, there has been a more than tenfold increase in the number of U.S. asylum applications from these three countries.

The reasons Central American migrants have for emigrating are often complex. Poverty levels are high across the Northern Triangle. Drought has contributed to large-scale crop failure, undermining livelihoods and food security in these predominantly agricultural societies. The UN has suggested that climate change is in part to blame. Meanwhile, weak governance contributes to pervasive corruption and violence in the absence of public services.

The most visible manifestation of survival migration from the Northern Triangle has been the migrant caravans that have periodically tried to enter the United States through Mexico. A survey by the International Organization for Migration of 800 people in the first caravans of 2019 revealed the complicated motives of the Central Americans who have participated in the northern exodus, with 45 percent of those polled indicating that they had moved mainly for better

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*The rhetoric of xenophobic right-wing figures in the United States echoes the pronouncements of their European counterparts.*

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economic conditions, nine percent because of violence and insecurity, and 45 percent because of a combination of both. Sixty-eight percent also said that they had had to change their residence in their country of origin in the previous year due to violence or insecurity. As Washington has stepped up enforcement and detention, many Central American migrants have opted to surrender to the U.S. Border Patrol in order to claim asylum rather than try to sneak across the border—contributing to a growing backlog of claims at the U.S. border.

### **AN UNEASY WELCOME**

Central America is not the only source of the Western Hemisphere's migrants, and the United States is hardly their only destination. Unrest in Venezuela has also driven massive numbers of people from their homes to seek refuge in many other places in the region. Under Maduro's increasingly authoritarian rule, the country has been beset by violence and economic upheaval since late 2015. Venezuela now has one of the highest murder rates in the world. Ninety percent of the population lives below the poverty line. There was close to 1.7 million percent hyperinflation in 2018.

The exodus ramped up in 2017, when the full weight of the economic crisis came to bear. Since then, up to four million Venezuelans—at least seven percent of the country's population—have left. This is an unprecedented development in the region, arguably surpassed only by the period between 1979 and 1992, when over 25 percent of El Salvador's population fled a civil war.

Venezuela's neighbors have responded in vastly different ways. Colombia's approach has been the most progressive. The country opened its doors to roughly 1.5 million Venezuelans and has granted them the right to work and to receive basic services. It has recognized Venezuelan immigration as a development opportunity, receiving a \$31.5 million grant from the World Bank earlier this year, alongside additional concessional finance, to provide jobs and improved social services to the migrants and the communities that host them. But Colombia's government refuses to call these Venezuelans refugees, since doing so might exacerbate a bureaucratic backlog in the asylum system and risk a political backlash in a country where anti-immigrant rhetoric is growing in the border regions.

Other countries have been less welcoming. At first, Peru opened its borders, allowing Venezuelans to apply for short-term stays or for asy-

lum and, from January 2017 until December 2018, offering Venezuelan migrants temporary access to work, education, and banking services. But by the end of 2018, Peru suspended that practice amid concerns that it was creating an incentive for more Venezuelans to come. In 2017, Brazil began offering Venezuelan migrants two-year residency visas and gave all asylum seekers from Venezuela access to work permits and basic services. In 2018, however, the governor of Roraima State appealed to the Supreme Federal Court to close the border until the conditions for “humanitarian reception” were in place. (The court dismissed the case.) Brazil has also tried, with limited success, to carry out an internal relocation scheme, in which around 5,000 Venezuelans in the border area have been transferred to 17 other states across the country. For its part, Ecuador initially welcomed fleeing Venezuelans but eventually introduced stricter border controls in August 2018. In January, the country witnessed a xenophobic backlash after a Venezuelan migrant killed his pregnant Ecuadorian girlfriend; in the face of the resulting anger and violence, many Venezuelans left Ecuador for Colombia.

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*Most South American migrants rely on their kith and kin to survive.*

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Meanwhile, international organizations have struggled to even define the crisis in South America, much less deal with it. Until this past spring, the UN High Commissioner for Refugees had only vaguely noted that the region was experiencing a “migrant crisis.” But on May 21, under pressure from human right activists, the UNHCR released a statement suggesting that most Venezuelan migrants were actually refugees in need of international protection. The World Bank has characterized the Venezuelan migration as “mainly based on economic reasons but with the characteristics of a refugee situation in terms of the speed of influx and levels of vulnerability.”

And yet everyone dealing with the situation on the ground agrees that a humanitarian tragedy is unfolding. On the border in Cúcuta, Colombia, around 50,000 people cross the checkpoint each day at the Simón Bolívar International Bridge. They set out with suitcases, bags, and hand trolleys to collect food and basic provisions that cannot be easily found in Venezuela. They buy and sell in Cúcuta’s La Parada market or eat at the soup kitchens run by organizations affiliated with the World Food Program, which serve a total of 8,000 meals per day. Up to 3,000 of those who cross every day wind up staying in Colombia. Those with passports



can regularize their status, access public services, and find work. By contrast, those without papers cannot get even the most basic entitlements.

Competition and a lack of adequate coordination among UN agencies and nongovernmental organizations is palpable. For example, during my recent visit to the border, some organizations pushed for unrestricted cash assistance to Venezuelans, while others—among them, the Colombian government—strongly counseled that this would merely exacerbate existing tensions between migrants and locals. Several agencies complained that other agencies initiated schemes without consulting relevant partners, despite the existence of an inter-agency coordination platform.

There are, of course, some guiding lights. In beleaguered Cúcuta, a “one-stop shop” border point operated by UN agencies and nongovernmental organizations offers emergency relief and guidance to those who most need it. Here, and at other points along the border, UNICEF provides vaccines to the youngest migrants. And a few reception centers offer overnight housing, but only on a temporary basis. Most migrants, however, rely on their kith and kin to survive.

## LESSONS FROM THE PAST

A new approach is needed to handle this situation—one that recognizes the contemporary realities of survival migration and relies on international cooperation rather than unilateralism. In 2016, Europe belatedly began to find solutions by strengthening international cooperation both among and beyond the 28 EU member states. The drop in Mediterranean crossings between 2016 and 2019 is due in part to improvements in the security situation in Syria. But the change has also come from strategic reforms aimed at strengthening internal and external cooperation.

In March 2016, the EU signed an agreement with Turkey, which during the crisis was the last place that millions of migrants passed through on their way to Europe. The EU offered Turkey around two billion euros of assistance in exchange for hosting and integrating refugees while limiting their outward movement. (Although criticized for making some migrant journeys even more dangerous, the deal has reduced Aegean Sea crossings for Greece and supported Turkey’s capacity and willingness to host 3.7 million refugees. Unfortunately, due to the growth of anti-immigrant sentiment in Turkey, officials in Ankara have recently started resettling refugees in the Levant.) The EU also created an emergency assistance fund for Africa in late 2015 and dedicated more than four billion euros to support collaboration in the broad area of

“migration and development” with African states. Agreements that the EU forged with countries such as Ethiopia and Jordan have created jobs, supported existing enterprises, and provided more sustainable opportunities for refugees and migrants in those countries. Europe’s approach has been far from perfect—that much is clear. But it is also undeniable that the crisis ended in part owing to policies that created sustainable development opportunities and removed some of the “push” factors that had caused the migrant surge. If U.S. policymakers are serious about developing more sustainable immigration policies, perhaps they ought to borrow European tactics, creating multilateral deals with countries in Latin America that aim to ensure the safety and economic opportunity of migrants in their countries of origin, transit, and asylum.

The Western Hemisphere could also look to its own past for inspiration. In 1984, the countries of the region issued the Cartagena Declaration on Refugees, which extended the definition of “refugee” to include people fleeing “massive violations of human rights or other circumstances which have seriously disturbed public order.” This definition aptly describes the circumstances of many of the region’s contemporary survival migrants. But until now, nearly all states have refrained from applying this extended definition to the plight of Central Americans or Venezuelans.

Policymakers could also draw lessons from the 1989 International Conference on Central American Refugees (CIREFCA)—which identified regional solutions for around two million displaced people across the hemisphere, more than half of whom were displaced across borders. CIREFCA is, in short, one of the most successful historical examples of cooperation on refugees anywhere in the world. The conference set standards for recognizing and responding to different categories of migration. And through CIREFCA, countries created sustainable sanctuaries closer to home for the region’s migrants.

The impetus behind the conference was just as dramatic as the migration crisis that is troubling the political landscape in the present day. By the end of the 1980s, after a decade of regional conflict that had produced around 160,000 casualties, there were millions of displaced people in Central America. Of these, around 150,000 were recognized as refugees, around 900,000 were displaced across borders but not regarded as refugees, and around 900,000 were considered internally displaced. CIREFCA aimed to remedy this problem as part of the region’s peace process at the end of the Cold War. The initiative for

the conference came from the UN, working closely with the Contadora Group (Colombia, Mexico, Panama, and Venezuela) and major donors such as the United States and the EU. As part of the process, the UNHCR and the UN Development Program established a joint secretariat, based in San José, Costa Rica.

The aim of CIREFCA was to address forced displacement through a development-based approach. Conference attendees called for the CIREFCA secretariat to implement 36 initial projects that would require \$375 million over a three-year period. Most of the projects aimed to ensure that, rather than having to migrate long distances in search of security and opportunity, migrants could receive protection and achieve prosperity closer to home. For example, through CIREFCA, the Mexican government undertook the development of large parts of the Yucatán Peninsula, including Campeche and Quintana Roo, states that at the time hosted tens of thousands of Guatemalan refugees. The project created agricultural jobs and other opportunities for Guatemalan refugees to build sustainable lives in Mexico, while simultaneously supporting the development of relatively impoverished areas of the peninsula. A number of other CIREFCA projects encouraged self-reliance on the part of refugees, empowering them to access opportunities both at home and in neighboring countries. For example, 62,000 Nicaraguans, 45,000 Guatemalans, and 27,000 Salvadorans returned home because integrated development projects cropped up in their local communities, schemes aimed at improving employment, infrastructure, and social services.

In the end, CIREFCA is estimated to have channeled more than \$422 million in additional resources to the region, most of it from the United States and the EU. But CIREFCA was not just a one-off pledging conference: it was an ambitious political undertaking that lasted from 1987 to 1995. It led to sustainable solutions even for those who were not officially refugees, using the term “externally displaced persons” to capture the needs of people in migration situations that the traditional terminology failed to describe. Ultimately, CIREFCA did more than just address a migration crisis: it laid the foundations for two decades of relative peace in Central America.

## **ANCHORS, NOT WALLS**

What the Americas need today is a revival of the spirit of international cooperation that drove CIREFCA. The recently forged Global Compact

on Refugees—endorsed at the UN General Assembly last year—is a step in the right direction. The agreement calls for responsibility sharing on refugee issues and encourages what could be termed “solidarity summits,” gatherings at which countries faced with major displacement challenges can present projects and proposals to the global donor community. Such summits would provide a platform for governments to agree on policies and norms around migrants, refugees, and those who fall in between. The summits would allow governments to pilot new approaches to forced displacement, creating mutually beneficial growth opportunities for both displaced populations and host communities.

The most obvious place to start would be a solidarity summit to address Venezuelan refugees and migrants, since there is a clear consensus in South America on the need for cooperation and an existing institutional mechanism through which to achieve it. Such a meeting could be hosted by the so-called Quito Group, 11 countries that signed a declaration in 2018 in the Ecuadorian capital calling for “substantially increased” resources to deal with the crisis. Whichever countries from the group that were prepared to move forward with the initiative could do so. The UNHCR and the International Organization for Migration would play a key role. (Eduardo Stein, the two organizations’ joint special representative for Venezuelan refugees and migrants, called for a “coherent, predictable, and harmonized regional response” in August.) Ideally, the summit would lead to a sustained process resembling the one employed by CIREFCA, run by an intergovernmental secretariat and backed by donor countries in the global North. The main purpose of the process would be twofold: to channel international funding into development projects that will benefit both migrants and host-country citizens and to commit to common regional standards for the reception and recognition of migrants across countries. Rich countries such as Canada and the United States have strong incentives to contribute, given the risk that an anti-immigrant backlash across Latin America may spread populist and even revolutionary politics.

The goal, above all, must be to expand some of the provisions traditionally available only to refugees to the survival migrants that are the face of today’s crisis. CIREFCA proved that such an approach can work, and its legacy is indisputably positive—the sustainable integration of thousands of refugees and other displaced populations. It is high time that the region embarked on a similar project, focused on building anchors rather than walls. 🌐



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# Let Russia Be Russia

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## The Case for a More Pragmatic Approach to Moscow

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*Thomas Graham*

Since the end of the Cold War, every U.S. president has come into office promising to build better relations with Russia—and each one has watched that vision evaporate. The first three—Bill Clinton, George W. Bush, and Barack Obama—set out to integrate Russia into the Euro-Atlantic community and make it a partner in building a global liberal order. Each left office with relations in worse shape than he found them, and with Russia growing ever more distant.

President Donald Trump pledged to establish a close partnership with Vladimir Putin. Yet his administration has only toughened the more confrontational approach that the Obama administration adopted after Russia's aggression against Ukraine in 2014. Russia remains entrenched in Ukraine, is opposing the United States in Europe and the Middle East with increasing brazenness, and continues to interfere in U.S. elections. As relations have soured, the risk of a military conflict has grown.

U.S. policy across four administrations has failed because, whether conciliatory or confrontational, it has rested on a persistent illusion: that the right U.S. strategy could fundamentally change Russia's sense of its own interests and basic worldview. It was misguided to ground U.S. policy in the assumption that Russia would join the community of liberal democratic nations, but it was also misguided to imagine that a more aggressive approach could compel Russia to abandon its vital interests.

A better approach must start from the recognition that relations between Washington and Moscow have been fundamentally competitive from the moment the United States emerged as a global power at the end of the nineteenth century, and they remain so today. The two

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**THOMAS GRAHAM** is a Distinguished Fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations and served as Senior Director for Russia on the National Security Council staff during the George W. Bush administration.



*Team of rivals: Putin and Trump at the G-20 summit in Hamburg, Germany, July 2017*

countries espouse profoundly different concepts of world order. They pursue opposing goals in regional conflicts such as those in Syria and Ukraine. The republican, democratic tradition of the United States stands in stark contrast to Russia's long history of autocratic rule. In both practical and ideological terms, a close partnership between the two states is unsustainable.

In the current climate, that understanding should come naturally to most U.S. policymakers. Much harder will be to recognize that ostracizing Russia will achieve little and likely prove to be counterproductive. Even if its relative power declines, Russia will remain a key player in the global arena thanks to its large nuclear arsenal, natural resources, geographic centrality in Eurasia, UN Security Council veto, and highly skilled population. Cooperating with Russia is essential to grappling with critical global challenges such as climate change, nuclear proliferation, and terrorism. With the exception of China, no country affects more issues of strategic and economic importance to the United States than Russia. And no other country, it must be said, is capable of destroying the United States in 30 minutes.

A more balanced strategy of restrained competition would not only reduce the risk of nuclear war but also provide the framework for the cooperation needed to tackle global challenges. Smarter relations with Russia can help guarantee European security and strategic stability,

bring a modicum of order to the Middle East, and manage the rise of China. As U.S. policymakers demand that Russia moderate its behavior, they must be prepared to scale back their near-term goals, especially in settling the crisis in Ukraine, to forge a more productive relationship with Moscow.

Above all, U.S. policymakers will need to see Russia plainly, without sentiment or ideology. A new Russia strategy must dispense with the magical thinking of previous administrations and instead seek incremental gains that advance long-term U.S. interests. Rather than trying to persuade Moscow to understand its own interests differently, Washington must demonstrate that those interests can be more safely pursued through both considered competition and cooperation with the United States.

### **END OF THE ILLUSION**

Washington's initial post-Cold War emphasis on partnership and integration fundamentally misread the reality in Russia, positing that the country was in the midst of a genuine democratic transition and that it was too weak to resist U.S. policies. To be sure, the premise that Russia was shedding its authoritarian past did not appear unreasonable in the early 1990s. In the U.S. view, the Cold War had ended with the triumph of Western democracy over Soviet totalitarianism. The former Soviet bloc countries began to democratize after the revolutions of 1989. The rising forces of globalization fed the belief that free-market democracy was the pathway to prosperity and stability in the decades ahead. The leaders of the new Russia—President Boris Yeltsin and the dynamic young reformers around him—declared their commitment to sweeping political and economic reforms.

Yet even in the 1990s, there were signs that these assumptions were wrong. Contrary to the dominant Western narrative, the collapse of the Soviet Union marked not a democratic breakthrough but the victory of Yeltsin, a populist, over Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev, who ironically was a more committed democrat, having overseen what remain the freest and fairest elections in Russian history. Russia had few enduring native democratic traditions to draw from and only a shaky sense of political community on which to base a well-functioning democracy. To make matters worse, the state institutions fell prey to rapacious oligarchs and regional barons. Ruthless cliques competed, often violently, to carve up the assets of

a once totally nationalized economy. Political chaos spread as old-time Communists and Soviet patriots battled more progressive forces.

The disorder intensified throughout the 1990s to the point that many observers feared Russia would crumble, just as the Soviet Union had earlier in the decade. The task of restoring order fell to Yeltsin's successor, Putin. Even as he packaged his plans in democratic rhetoric, Putin made clear in a document called "Russia at the Turn of the Millennium" (released on December 30, 1999) that he intended to return to the traditional Russian model of a strong, highly centralized authoritarian state. "Russia," he wrote, "will not soon, if ever, become a version of the United States or England, where liberal values have deep historical roots. . . . For Russians, a strong and sturdy state is not an anomaly to be resisted. To the contrary, it is the source and guarantor of order, the initiator and driver of any change."

U.S. officials were not blind to the obstacles to democratic reform or to Putin's intentions, but in the afterglow of the Cold War victory, they insisted that partnership with Russia had to be grounded in shared democratic values; mere common interests would not suffice. To build public support for its policies, each administration assured Americans that Russia's leaders were committed to democratic reforms and processes. From the 1990s on, the White House measured the success of its approach in large part in terms of Russia's progress toward becoming a stronger and more functional democracy, an uncertain enterprise over which the United States had little influence. Not surprisingly, the strategy collapsed when it proved impossible to bridge the gap between that illusion and Russia's increasingly authoritarian reality. For Clinton, the moment of truth came when Yeltsin installed a new government of conservatives and Communists after the 1998 financial collapse in Russia; for Bush, it came when Putin cracked down on civil society in reaction to the Orange Revolution in Ukraine in 2004; and for Obama, it came when Putin announced in 2011 that, after having served as prime minister, he would reclaim the presidency.

The second flawed premise—that Russia lacked the strength to challenge the United States—also appeared sensible in the early post-Soviet years. Russia's economy contracted by nearly 40 percent between 1991 and 1998. The once feared Red Army, starved of investment, became a shadow of its former self. Russia was dependent on Western financial support to keep both its economy and its government afloat. In these circumstances, the Clinton administration



for the most part got its way, intervening in the Balkans and expanding NATO without serious pushback from Russia.

This premise, however, became less plausible as Russia's economy rapidly recovered after Putin took office and restored order by clamping down on the oligarchs and regional barons. He subsequently launched a concerted effort to modernize the military. Yet the Bush administration, convinced of Washington's unparalleled might in the "unipolar moment," showed little respect for renewed Russian power. Bush withdrew from the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty, expanded NATO further, and welcomed the so-called color revolutions in Georgia and Ukraine, with their anti-Russian overtones. Similarly, the Obama administration, although less certain of American power, still dismissed Russia. As the upheavals of the Arab Spring unfolded in 2011, Obama declared that Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, a Russian client, had to go. Washington also paid little heed to Russia's objections when the United States and its allies exceeded the terms of the UN Security Council-backed intervention in Libya, turning a mandate to protect an endangered population into an operation to overthrow the country's strongman, Muammar al-Qaddafi.

Both the Bush and the Obama administrations were brought crashing down to earth. The Russian incursion into Georgia in 2008 demonstrated to the Bush administration that Russia had a veto over NATO expansion in the guise of the use of force. Similarly, Russia's seizure of Crimea and destabilization of eastern Ukraine in 2014 shocked the Obama administration, which had earlier welcomed the ouster of Viktor Yanukovich, the pro-Russian Ukrainian president. A year later, Russia's military intervention in Syria saved Assad from imminent defeat at the hands of U.S.-backed rebels.

## **WILL TO POWER**

Today, nearly everyone in Washington has dropped the pretense that Russia is on the path to democracy, and the Trump administration considers Russia to be a strategic competitor. These are overdue course corrections. Yet the current strategy of punishing and ostracizing Russia is also flawed. Beyond the obvious point that the United States cannot isolate Russia against the wishes of such major powers as China and India, this strategy makes some grave mistakes.

For one thing, it exaggerates Russian power and demonizes Putin, turning relations into a zero-sum struggle in which the only acceptable outcome of any dispute is Russia's capitulation. But Putin's foreign

policy has been less successful than advertised. His actions in Ukraine, aimed at preventing that country's westward drift, have only tied Ukraine more closely to the West while refocusing NATO on its original mission of containing Russia. Putin's meddling in U.S. elections has complicated relations with the United States, which Russia needs to normalize to win greater foreign investment and to create a long-term alternative to its excessive strategic dependence on China.

In the absence of concerted Western action, Putin has inserted Russia as a major player in many geopolitical conflicts, most notably in Syria. Nevertheless, Putin has yet to demonstrate that he can bring any conflict to an end that consolidates

Russia's gains. At a time of economic stagnation and spreading socioeconomic discontent, his activist foreign policy now risks overstretch. In these circumstances, Putin needs to retrench. And

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*Putin's foreign policy has been less successful than advertised.*

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that imperative should open up possibilities for the United States to turn to diplomacy and reduce the burden of competition with Russia while protecting U.S. interests.

Another flaw in the current strategy is that it imagines Russia as a pure kleptocracy, whose leaders are motivated principally by a desire to preserve their wealth and ensure their survival. To work, this policy assumes that sanctioned officials and oligarchs will pressure Putin to change his policy in Ukraine, for example, or unwind Russia's interference in American domestic politics. Nothing of the sort has happened because Russia is more like a patrimonial state, in which personal wealth and social position are ultimately dependent on the good graces of those in power.

U.S. policymakers are also guilty of not reckoning seriously with Russia's desire to be perceived as a great power. Russia is indeed weak by many measures: its economy is a fraction of the size of the U.S. economy, its population is unhealthy by U.S. standards, and its investment in the high-tech sector is far below U.S. levels. But Russian leaders cling to the conviction that to survive, their country must be a great power—one of the few countries that determine the structure, substance, and direction of world affairs—and they are prepared to endure great ordeals in pursuit of that status. That mindset has driven Russia's global conduct since Peter the Great brought his realm into Europe more than 300 years ago. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russian leaders have focused on restoring Russia's great-power

status, just as their predecessors did after the national humiliation of the Crimean War in the 1850s and then again after the demise of the Russian empire in 1917. As Putin wrote two decades ago, “For the first time in the past two to three centuries, [Russia] risks sliding to the second, and possibly even third, echelon of world states. To prevent this, we must exert all our intellectual, physical, and moral forces. . . . Everything depends on our ability to grasp the dimensions of the threat, to rally together, and to commit to this long and difficult task.”

Part of that task is countering the United States, which Putin sees as the primary obstacle to Russia’s great-power aspirations. In contrast to what it imagines as Washington’s unipolar ambitions, the Kremlin insists on the existence of a multipolar world. More concretely, Russia has sought to undermine Washington’s standing by checking U.S. interests in Europe and the Middle East and has tried to tarnish the United States’ image as a paragon of democratic virtue by interfering in its elections and exacerbating domestic discord.

## **RUSSIA’S WORLD**

In its quest for great-power status, Russia poses specific geopolitical challenges to the United States. These challenges stem from Russia’s age-old predicament of having to defend a vast, sparsely settled, multiethnic country located on a landmass that lacks formidable physical barriers and that abuts either powerful states or unstable territories. Historically, Russia has dealt with this challenge by maintaining tight control domestically, creating buffer zones on its borders, and preventing the emergence of a strong coalition of rival powers. Today, this approach invariably runs against U.S. interests in China, Ukraine, Europe, and the Middle East.

No part of eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union has loomed larger in the Russian imagination than Ukraine, which is strategically positioned as a pathway into the Balkans and central Europe, blessed with tremendous economic potential, and hailed by Russians as the cradle of their own civilization. When a U.S.-supported popular movement in 2014 threatened to rip Ukraine out of Russia’s orbit, the Kremlin seized Crimea and instigated a rebellion in the eastern region of the Donbas. What the West considered a flagrant violation of international law, the Kremlin saw as self-defense.

When they look at Europe in its entirety, Russian leaders see at once a concrete threat and a stage for Russian greatness. In practical terms, the steps Europe took toward political and economic consolidation

raised the prospect of an enormous entity on Russia's borders that, like the United States, would dwarf Russia in population, wealth, and power. Psychologically, Europe remains central to Russia's great-power sensibilities. For the past three centuries, Russia has demonstrated its prowess on Europe's great battlefields and through its grand diplomatic conferences. After the defeat of Napoleon in 1814, for example, it was the Russian emperor Alexander I who received the key to the city of Paris. Europe's consolidation and the continued expansion of NATO have had the effect of pushing Russia out of Europe and diminishing its voice in continental affairs. And so the Kremlin has accelerated efforts to exploit the fault lines within and between European states and to stoke doubts in vulnerable NATO members about their allies' commitment to collective defense.

In the Middle East, Russia has returned after an absence of some 30 years. At first, Putin intervened in Syria both to protect a long-standing client and to prevent the victory of radical Islamist forces with ties to extremists inside Russia. But after saving Assad and seeing the absence of a strong U.S. role, his ambitions grew. Russia decided to use the Middle East as an arena to showcase its great-power credentials. Largely bypassing the UN-sponsored peacemaking process, in which the United States is a central player, Russia has teamed up with Iran and Turkey to seek a final political resolution of the crisis in Syria. To reduce the risk of a direct conflict between Iran and Israel, Russia has strengthened its diplomatic ties to Israel. It has rebuilt relations with Egypt and worked with Saudi Arabia to manage oil prices.

It has also grown closer to China in developing a strategic counterbalance to the United States. This relationship has helped Russia resist the United States in Europe and the Middle East, but the greater concern for Washington should be how it enhances Beijing's capabilities. Russia has aided China's commercial penetration of Central Asia and, to a lesser extent, Europe and the Middle East. It has given China access to natural resources at favorable prices and has sold the country sophisticated military technology. In short, Russia is abetting China's rise as a formidable competitor to the United States.

Moscow's more assertive foreign policy today is a reflection not of the country's growing strength—in absolute terms, its power hasn't increased much—but of the perception that U.S. disarray has magnified Russia's relative power. The country's behavior is also driven by a persistent fear that guides Russian foreign policy: the sense that in the long



run, Russia will fall dangerously behind both the United States and China. The Russian economy is stagnating, and even official projections see little hope for improvement in the next ten years. Russia cannot invest as much as its two competitors in the critical technologies, such as artificial intelligence, bioengineering, and robotics, that will shape the character of power in the future. Putin may be pressing hard now, at the time of Russia's heightened relative power, to better position the country in the new multipolar world order he sees emerging.

### **BETWEEN ACCOMMODATION AND RESISTANCE**

The challenge Russia now poses to the United States does not echo the existential struggle of the Cold War. Rather, the contest is a more limited competition between great powers with rival strategic imperatives and interests. If the United States was able to reach accommodations with the Soviet Union to strengthen global peace and security while advancing American interests and values, surely it can do the same with Russia today.

Beginning in Europe, U.S. policymakers should give up any ambitions of expanding NATO farther into formerly Soviet spaces. Rather than courting countries that NATO is unwilling to defend militarily—note the limp responses to Russian attacks on Georgia and Ukraine—the alliance should strengthen its own internal cohesion and reassure vulnerable members of its commitment to collective defense. Halting NATO expansion eastward would remove a central reason for Russia's encroachments on former Soviet states. But the United States should still cooperate on security matters with those states, a kind of relationship that Russia tolerates.

So far, the United States has insisted that the possibility of NATO membership remains open to Ukraine. Washington has categorically rejected Russia's incorporation of Crimea and insisted that the conflict in the Donbas be brought to an end on the basis of the agreement signed in Minsk in 2015, which stipulates a special autonomous status for separatist regions inside a reunited Ukraine. This approach has made little headway. The Donbas conflict continues, and Russia is putting down deeper roots in Crimea. Distracted from reform by the struggle with Russia, Ukraine is beset by corruption, political volatility, and economic underperformance.

The recent election in Ukraine of a new president, Volodymyr Zelensky, whose supporters now dominate the parliament, has created

an opening for a comprehensive resolution of the crisis. Two tradeoffs are essential. First, to allay Russian concerns, the United States should tell Ukraine that NATO membership is off the table, while deepening bilateral security cooperation with Kiev. Second, Kiev should recognize Russia's incorporation of Crimea in exchange for Moscow's acceptance of the full reintegration of the Donbas into Ukraine without any special status. In a comprehensive agreement, Ukrainians would also receive compensation for lost property in Crimea and Ukraine would be afforded access to offshore resources and guaranteed passage through the Kerch Strait to ports on the Sea of Azov. The United States and the EU would incrementally ease their sanctions on Russia as these arrangements took effect. At the same time, they would offer Ukraine a substantial assistance package aimed at facilitating reform in the belief that a strong, prosperous Ukraine is both the best deterrent against future Russian aggression and a necessary foundation for more constructive Russian-Ukrainian relations.

Such an approach would be met initially with great skepticism in Kiev, Moscow, and elsewhere in Europe. But Zelensky has staked his presidency on resolving the Donbas conflict, and Putin would welcome the chance to redirect resources and attention to countering spreading socioeconomic unrest in Russia. Meanwhile, European leaders are suffering from Ukraine fatigue and want to normalize relations with Russia while still upholding the principles of European security. The time is ripe for bold diplomacy that would allow all sides to claim a partial victory and accommodate the hard realities on the ground: NATO is not prepared to accept Ukraine as a member, Crimea is not going back to Ukraine, and a separatist movement in the Donbas is nonviable without Moscow's active involvement.

A smarter Russia strategy would also better reckon with the implications of the Kremlin's military intervention in the Middle East. It is Iran—not Russia—that poses the main challenge there. When it comes to Iran, Russia has diverging, but not necessarily opposing, interests from those of the United States. Like the United States, Russia does not want Iran to obtain nuclear weapons—that was why it supported the nuclear deal with Iran, the Joint Comprehensive Plan

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*After defeating Napoleon,  
the Russian emperor  
Alexander I received the  
key to the city of Paris.*

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of Action, from which the Trump administration withdrew in 2018. Like the United States, Russia does not want Iran to dominate the Middle East; Moscow seeks to forge a new equilibrium in the region, albeit with a different configuration than the one sought by Washington. The Kremlin has worked to improve relations with other regional powers, such as Egypt, Israel, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey, none of which is especially friendly with Iran. Russia has paid particular attention to Israel, allowing it to strike Iranian and Hezbollah positions in Syria. If the United States deferred to Russia's limited security interests in Syria and accepted Russia as a regional player, it could likely persuade the Kremlin to do more to check aggressive Iranian behavior. The Trump administration is already moving in this direction, but a more vigorous effort is warranted.

Washington must also update its approach to arms control. What worked for the last 50 years no longer will. The world is shifting toward a multipolar order, and China in particular is modernizing its forces. Countries are developing advanced conventional weapons capable of

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destroying hardened targets once vulnerable only to nuclear weapons and cyberweapons that could put at risk nuclear command-and-control systems. As a result, the arms control regime is breaking down. The Bush administration withdrew from the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty in 2002, which the president de-

scribed as an obsolete relic of the Cold War, and in 2018, the Trump administration withdrew from the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty, which it had derided as ineffective and out of date.

Nevertheless, the United States should prolong New START—the strategic arms reduction treaty signed in 2010 that is set to expire in 2021—a move that Russia supports despite the Trump administration's hesitation. The treaty fosters transparency and trust between the two countries—essential qualities in a time of strained relations—but it does not restrain the accelerating arms race in increasingly sophisticated and powerful weapons. The most promising systems—hypersonic weapons and cyberweapons, for example—fall outside the New START treaty's purview. Policymakers need to develop a new arms control regime that encompasses novel, rapidly developing technologies and includes other major powers. Although

it is necessary to bring China into the process at some point, the United States and Russia should take the lead, as they have before—they possess unique experience in considering the theoretical and practical requirements of strategic stability and corresponding arms control measures. Together, Washington and Moscow should develop a new arms control regime and then bolster it with multilateral support.

On strategic nuclear issues and other matters, the United States cannot prevent the rise of China, but it can channel growing Chinese power in ways that are consistent with U.S. interests. It should make Russia part of this effort rather than drive Russia into China's embrace, as the United States is now doing. It is impossible, of course, to turn Russia against China; Russia has every reason to pursue good relations with a neighbor that has already surpassed it as a major power. But the United States could deftly encourage a different balance of power in Northeast Asia that would serve U.S. purposes.

To do so, U.S. policymakers should help multiply Russia's alternatives to China, thereby improving the Kremlin's bargaining position and reducing the risk that its trade and security agreements with Beijing will be tilted heavily in China's favor, as they are now. As U.S.-Russian relations improve in other areas, the United States should focus on removing those sanctions that prevent Japanese, South Korean, and U.S. investment in Russia's Far East and that block joint ventures with Russian firms in Central Asia. Increasing Russia's options would give the Kremlin greater leverage in dealing with China, to the United States' advantage.

U.S. efforts to moderate competition on regional issues could incline Russia to curb its electoral meddling, but the problem won't go away easily. Some level of interference, from Russia and from other states, is unavoidable in today's interconnected world. Because European democracies face similar challenges, the United States should work with its allies to develop joint and reinforcing responses to these cyberthreats. There should be some redlines regarding Russian behavior; for instance, U.S. officials should take a strong stance against hacking that aims to weaponize stolen information or corrupt data, including voter rolls and vote counts. With better-coordinated exchanges of intelligence, the sharing of best practices, and occasional joint action, the United States and its allies must harden critical electoral infrastructure, push back against Russia with criminal prosecutions and targeted sanctions, and, when appropriate, launch cyber-counterstrikes.



Russian propaganda outlets, such as the television channel RT, Sputnik radio, and social media accounts, pose a trickier problem. A confident, mature, and sophisticated democratic society should be capable of containing this threat with ease without frantically trying to shut down offending websites and Twitter accounts. Amid hyper-partisan rancor in the United States, however, the media and the political class have exaggerated the threat, blaming Russia for domestic discord and dangerously narrowing the room for critical debate by insinuating that opinions that might align with official Russian preferences are part of a Kremlin-inspired influence campaign. A more constructive approach would be for the United States and other democracies to foster greater awareness of the arts of media manipulation and help raise the critical reading skills of their publics, without dampening the vigorous debate that is the lifeblood of democratic societies. Some Scandinavian countries and Baltic states have devoted considerable effort to these tasks, but the United States has lagged behind.

As the United States hardens its systems and educates its citizens, it should also involve Russia in establishing rules of the road in cyberspace. Even if such rules are not fully observed in practice, they could act as a restraint on the most troubling behavior, much in the way the Geneva Conventions have constrained armed conflict.

On all these issues, the proposed mix of accommodation and resistance takes into account the hard realities of Russian interests and American power. This approach stands in sharp contrast to the ones U.S. administrations have pursued since the end of the Cold War, which misread Russia and refused to recognize U.S. limitations. In many ways, this strategy would represent a return to the tradition of U.S. foreign policy before the end of the Cold War.

That grand tradition was forward-looking, pursuing foreign policy with patience over time and satisfied in the short term with incremental gains. The United States did not fear making accommodations with Moscow because it was confident in its values and its future, aware of its great power but mindful of its limitations and respectful of its rival's power. This subtle understanding marked the strategies that all U.S. Cold War-era presidents pursued to master the challenge from Moscow. By recapturing the virtues of its past, the United States can master that challenge again today. 🌐

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# Beyond Great Forces

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## How Individuals Still Shape History

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*Daniel Byman and Kenneth M. Pollack*

**H**istory used to be told as the story of great men. Julius Caesar, Frederick the Great, George Washington, Napoléon Bonaparte, Adolf Hitler, Mao Zedong—individual leaders, both famous and infamous, were thought to drive events. But then it became fashionable to tell the same stories in terms of broader structural forces: raw calculations of national power, economic interdependence, or ideological waves. Leaders came to be seen as just vehicles for other, more important factors, their personalities and predilections essentially irrelevant. What mattered was not great men or women but great forces.

In his 1959 classic, *Man, the State, and War*, the scholar Kenneth Waltz made the case for this new approach. He argued that focusing on individual leaders or human nature more broadly offered little purchase when it came to understanding global politics. Instead, one should look at the framework of the international system and the distribution of power across it. In the midst of the Cold War, Waltz was contending that it mattered little whether Dwight Eisenhower or Adlai Stevenson occupied the White House, or Joseph Stalin or Nikita Khrushchev the Kremlin. The United States and the Soviet Union would pursue the same interests, seek the same allies, and otherwise be forced by the pressure of Cold War competition to act in a certain way.

Academics embraced the “structuralist” *Zeitgeist*, and in subsequent decades, although some theorists expanded their list of the primary movers in international relations to include regime types, institutions, and ideas, they continued to downplay leaders. Today, at

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**DANIEL BYMAN** is a Professor at Georgetown University's School of Foreign Service and a Senior Fellow at the Brookings Institution.

**KENNETH M. POLLACK** is a Resident Scholar at the American Enterprise Institute.

a time when vast impersonal forces appear to define our world, that bias against the individual might seem justified. Economics, technology, and politics are all changing in ways that seemed unimaginable only decades ago. Developments in communications, transportation, climate, education, cultural values, and health have fundamentally altered relationships among people within communities and across the globe. The information revolution has given rise to the superempowered individual and the superempowered state and pitted them against each other. Meanwhile, power is being redistributed across the globe, with the unipolar era of American primacy that followed the Cold War giving way to an unpredictable multipolarity. Such are the faceless beasts wreaking havoc today.

Structural factors and technological change no doubt drive much of states' behavior, but they are not the only pieces of the puzzle. Even today, individual leaders can ride, guide, or resist the broader forces of international politics. And so there are still some men and women who are charting their nations' paths—some beneficial, some disastrous, but all inconceivable without those leaders' individual characters.

## **THE REVOLUTIONARIES**

Saudi Arabia's de facto ruler, Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, or MBS, is the most obvious example of a leader defying the pressure of both domestic politics and international circumstances and, in so doing, redefining both, for better and worse. For decades, change in Saudi Arabia moved at a glacial pace. The question of whether women should be allowed to drive, for example, had been debated since 1990 with no resolution. Saudi leaders ruled collectively, ensuring that any policy changes were accepted by all the major branches of the sprawling royal family and the religious establishment. Although the ruling elite talked about the importance of fundamental reform for years, they did little to nothing, thwarted by conservative clerics, powerful economic interests, and a consensus-oriented political culture.

Then came MBS. MBS means to upend Saudi Arabia's economy and society (but, crucially, not its political system), and he has begun secularizing Saudi society, overhauling the kingdom's traditional educational system, and reforming its stunted economy. Like an earlier generation of autocratic modernizers—Benito Mussolini of Italy, Kemal Atatürk of Turkey, Stalin, and Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi of Iran—he is determined to drag his country into the new century



and isn't put off by the human cost of doing so. Whether he succeeds or fails, MBS has defied the risk-averse logic of Saudi politics and is betting everything on his far-reaching reforms.

On foreign policy, MBS has also broken with decades of tradition. From 1953 to 2015, under Kings Saud, Faisal, Khalid, Fahd, and Abdullah, Saudi Arabia had a modest international role. It mostly relied on others, primarily the United States, to secure its interests, tossing in a little checkbook diplomacy from time to time. It rarely fought wars, and when it did, it was only as a bit player following someone else's lead. It kept its squabbles with its Arab allies under wraps and hewed closely to the American line. MBS has charted a radically different course. Holding Lebanon's prime minister hostage to force him to resign, intervening in the Yemeni civil war, isolating Qatar, killing the Saudi dissident Jamal Khashoggi in Turkey, cozying up to China and Russia, threatening to acquire nuclear weapons, forging a tacit alliance with the Israelis at the expense of the Palestinians—all represent breathtaking departures from past policy. Although the kingdom's changing international circumstances make some of this understandable, MBS has consistently chosen the most radical option, at the far extreme of what international incentives alone would have predicted.

It is useful to consider what might have happened if the system had worked as it traditionally had. In 2017, King Salman, who had ascended to the throne two years earlier, sidelined the incumbent crown prince, his nephew Mohammed bin Nayef, and replaced him with MBS, one of his younger sons. Nayef was a close U.S. counterterrorism partner and an establishment man who favored stability above all. Indeed, his initial appointment as crown prince was in part meant to calm any fears that King Salman would take the country in a dramatically different direction. It is hard to imagine that Nayef would have risked alienating the clerical establishment while embarking on high-risk gambits across the Arab world. But owing to some combination of ambition, vision, ego, youth, risk tolerance, insight, and ruthlessness, MBS has done exactly that.

Such top-down revolutionaries are few and far between. Yet when they appear, they are transformative. Stalin turned the Soviet Union into an industrial power, slaughtering tens of millions of people in the process. Mao tried to do something similar in China, successfully uniting the country and destroying the power of traditional elites,



*Prince Charming: Mohammed bin Salman in London, March 2018*

but at the cost of millions of lives. His successor, Deng Xiaoping, transformed the country again by dumping Mao's state-centric economic model, thus enabling China's remarkable rise.

## **THE DECIDERS**

Across the Persian Gulf, MBS' great rival is a very different kind of leader, but one who also exercises an outsize impact. Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, Iran's supreme leader, is a cautious old man. If MBS is defying the impersonal forces of both Saudi Arabia's domestic politics and its traditional foreign policy, Khamenei sits at the crossroads of Iran's intersecting domestic and international pressures and directs the traffic as he sees fit.

Today, it is simplistic, but not entirely inaccurate, to say that Iranian politics is a struggle between two opposing camps. A group of reformists and pragmatists seeks to reform Iran's foreign and economic policies to address the dire needs of the Iranian people. Their approach represents a natural response to Iran's circumstances: it is a resource-rich country that has been impoverished and immiserated by its own aggressive behavior. Opposing the pragmatists is a group of hard-liners devoted to both aggression abroad and repression at

home, and they dominate Iran's domestic politics. This camp is motivated more by its Persian nationalism and revolutionary zeal than by a cool-headed examination of how to grow Iran's economy or end its diplomatic isolation.

Khamenei is the pivot. He weighs the international pressure pushing Iran in the direction of the reformists and pragmatists against the domestic pressure from the hard-liners. With these impersonal forces more or less in balance, it is Khamenei who gets to choose which way to tack as each issue comes before him. Sometimes, he sides with the hard-liners—for instance, doubling down on the support of militias in Iraq, Syria, and Yemen. At other times, he sides with the pragmatists, as when he accepted the 2015 nuclear deal brokered by the United States, an agreement that promised to revive Iran's economy through international trade in exchange for limits on its nuclear program.

It was not inevitable that an Iranian leader would act this way. After the death of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, in 1989, one leading candidate to succeed him was Mohammad Reza Golpaygani. Anyone chosen

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*There are still some men and women who are charting their nations' paths—some beneficial, some disastrous.*

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would have agreed with the general contours of the revolutionary framework established by Khomeini, but within those guidelines, much remained unsettled. Compared with Khamenei, Golpaygani was a more traditional conservative, skeptical of what he saw as the regime's social tolerance by allowing music on radio and television,

yet far less revolutionary in his foreign policy views. In the end, revolutionary legitimacy trumped scholarly strength, and the mullahs—with Khomeini's blessing—selected Khamenei.

How might Golpaygani have ruled? Given his preferences, he would likely have erred more on the side of social conservatism and less on the side of aggressive foreign policy. Similarly, he probably would have favored more limits on the clergy's role in politics, taking a more traditional view that religious leaders should stick to issues of morality. In this scenario, Iran since 1989 would have focused more on enforcing social mores at home and less on stirring the pot abroad. Yet it was Khamenei that ascended to Khomeini's throne, and so it has been he who has chosen among the competing strands of Iranian policy.

If Khamenei is the most obvious example of a leader who makes the ultimate choice of which current to ride when the impersonal forces are in conflict, he is hardly the only one. In different circumstances, German Chancellor Angela Merkel plays the same role. During the eurozone crisis, the international economic forces affecting Germany consistently called for a more proactive approach to Greece's insolvency and the economic troubles of Germany's other eurozone partners. Yet Merkel instead took the more conservative path, which resonated with Germany's domestic politics, even though this ended up dragging out the crisis. At the same time, on the issue of refugees, she embraced liberal international norms and took in hundreds of thousands of Syrians at a time when domestic politics in Germany and the rest of Europe was turning against charity to foreigners. Another chancellor might have made different choices: indeed, the politician who held the number two position in Germany at the time, Vice Chancellor Sigmar Gabriel, favored a more generous approach toward the Greek government, but on refugees, he bowed to domestic pressure and called for caps on admissions.

## **THE SURVIVORS**

Bashar al-Assad and Nicolás Maduro are marked men. When it comes to both Syria's president and Venezuela's, there are many people who want them out of power, if not dead. And yet by remaining alive and in office, they have compromised the best interests of their countries.

Both Syria and Venezuela are desperate nations, racked by internal conflict, tormented by starvation, shedding refugees in epic quantities, and beset by various external powers. There is nothing about the power or the international position of either Syria or Venezuela that has caused its anguish. Both suffered a horrific breakdown in their internal politics, but in both cases, there were fixes that could have been made long ago to end the misery. Getting rid of Maduro would have been a huge step toward alleviating Venezuela's pain, just as getting rid of Assad could have made it possible to reach a compromise to end the Syrian civil war.

It's not that simple, of course: many Venezuelan elites, particularly the military, are unwilling to depose Maduro, and many Syrian minority groups, particularly the ruling family's own Alawite community, feel the same way about Assad. Yet there is also no question that the



principal grievance of the Venezuelan opposition, and of the United States, has become Maduro himself, and should he find a comfortable exile on a Caribbean island, it would be far easier to resolve the conflict. Likewise, in years past, both the Iranians and the Russians at times floated to the United States the idea that they were willing to sacrifice Assad as long as their own interests—and those of the Alawites—were protected. If Assad had found himself on the wrong end of an assassin's knife or under an enforced vacation during a visit to Tehran, a new leader might have proved willing to make more concessions to the opposition and lay the groundwork for a negotiated peace. Yet both leaders' continued hold on power, in the face of both international and domestic pressure to go, has locked their countries into needless agony.

Some might scoff at this argument, contending that vast impersonal forces—the ruthless domestic politics in a country roiled by civil war and a regime's inherent desire to survive—make it unimaginable that any leader in such a position would ever step down. Yet it is worth remembering that South African President F. W. de Klerk did just that. De Klerk had plenty of incentives to fight for apartheid to remain in power, just as his predecessors did. Indeed, when de Klerk assumed power, Archbishop Desmond Tutu, an antiapartheid activist, said that the leadership change was “just musical chairs.” If de Klerk had remained committed to apartheid, the most likely outcome would have been South Africa's descent into even greater racial violence or quite possibly an all-out civil war, not much different from what is happening in Syria and Venezuela today. Yet de Klerk did the opposite, dismantling apartheid, allowing free elections in 1994, and yielding power when he lost. Despite a background that suggested he would fight to preserve the apartheid system, he recognized both the need to avert civil war in South Africa and the opportunity to bring his country into the ranks of civilized nations.

## **THE OPPORTUNISTS**

Fortune favors the bold, and some leaders are skilled at seizing opportunities as they arise. Russian President Vladimir Putin exemplifies how a wily leader can parlay a relatively weak position into a much stronger one. In 1999, Putin replaced Sergei Stepashin as Russia's prime minister, becoming the fifth person to occupy the post in two years. Few expected this creature of the Russian system to shake things

up, but within weeks, he capitalized on violence in Chechnya to renew the war there, gambling (correctly) that a no-holds-barred fight would increase his popularity, and soon succeeded Boris Yeltsin as president.

Putin represented a sharp break with the past. Yeltsin and the pre-Putin prime ministers under him had favored accommodation with the West, acquiesced in NATO interventions in the Balkans, recognized Russia's seemingly irreversible military weakness, and largely abandoned Russia's former friends, such as Syria. Putin offered something new. Fearing that parts of the former Soviet Union were becoming too close to the West, he supported separatist movements in Georgia and Ukraine, annexing Crimea outright. Farther afield, he has backed Assad with limited military commitments to showcase Russian power, and he is even taking sides in Libya's civil war. Most dramatically, Putin rolled the dice and covertly backed the U.S. presidential campaign of Donald Trump as part of a broader effort to intensify polarization in the United States and other Western countries. It's hard to imagine all of this as part of any long-term plan. Rather, Putin has proved a master of Russian and international politics, cutting and thrusting whenever his foes present an opening.

A different faceless bureaucrat coming to power after Yeltsin might have shifted course, too. Russia's weakness abroad and economic collapse at home left the Yeltsin regime with few enthusiasts. Yet the course of such change probably would have been more modest, with less emphasis on adventurism abroad. Stepashin, for example, had little interest in renewing the war in Chechnya, and he ended up joining a political party that favors improved ties with the United States and even membership in the EU. Putin, by contrast, has evinced a combination of pride, cynicism, nationalism, and comfort with risk, all of which have made him willing to take on the West around the world at a time when many observers have considered his country weak.

## **THE EGOISTS**

*L'état, c'est moi* (I am the state), words often attributed to Louis XIV, may seem to reflect a bygone age, when the purpose of the state was to reflect the glory of one person. But Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, who has dominated his country's politics for nearly two decades, embodies how egoism can still shape foreign policy. For decades, different Turkish regimes had pursued the country's complex set of interests in largely similar ways: trying to stay out of the

imbroglio in the Middle East, aligning Turkey with NATO and the United States, and portraying the country as a secular, westernizing nation that deserved membership in the EU. By the turn of this century, Turkey seemed to be growing ever more stable and westernized as it moved away from domestic military dominance. Long friendly toward the West, it was now on the path to democracy, turning into a normal European state, with strong institutions.

Erdogan had other plans. Since he became prime minister, in 2003, Turkish policies have repeatedly whipsawed. The regime supported its Kurdish citizens and then persecuted them; worked with Assad, tried to overthrow him, and then cooperated with him again; rejected Russia and then embraced it; cooperated with Israel and then denounced it. Domestically, Erdogan shelved democratic reforms and heightened his repression.

Part of the about-face can be attributed to opportunism and realpolitik, but much of it reflects Erdogan's response to perceived personal slights and his pursuit of glory. In 2010, an Israeli raid on a flotilla trying to break the blockade of the Gaza Strip led to the deaths of ten Turks on the ship the *Mavi Marmara*. Despite decades of close strategic cooperation between Turkey and Israel, Erdogan demanded

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*Russian President Vladimir Putin exemplifies how a wily leader can parlay a relatively weak position into a much stronger one.*

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an apology, recalled the Turkish ambassador to Israel, and moved closer to Hamas in Gaza. A year later, he viewed Assad's crackdown on demonstrators as yet another slight, since it gave the lie to his claim that he could temper the Syrian dictator, prompting Erdogan to back an array of opposition forces against Assad. An analysis of the Turk-

ish leader's verbal output by the scholars Aylin Gorener and Meltem Ucal found that he scored high in believing he can control events and in distrusting others but also that he sees the world in black and white, is hypersensitive to criticism, and has trouble focusing on the implementation of policies. Erdogan seems convinced that he and only he is equipped to save Turkey from its enemies.

An alternative leader, even one who managed to channel the same anti-Western political coalition that Erdogan has, would probably have pursued a remarkably different foreign policy. Indeed, members of Erdogan's own party have espoused different views on the Kurds,

Syria, and other core issues. Had one of them taken power instead, that leader might still have pivoted to the Middle East and away from Europe, but it is far less likely that he would have acted so erratically or personalized politics to such a degree. A more pragmatic head of state might have cracked down sooner on the Islamic State (or ISIS)—for years, Erdogan allowed the group to use Turkey as a jihadi highway to Syria—cooperated more with Saudi Arabia and other opponents of Assad, or even tried earlier to strike a deal with the Syrian dictator.

At times, egoists can approach absurdity and drag their countries into outright disaster. Idi Amin, who seized power in Uganda in a 1971 coup, took on more and more titles as his ego ballooned, eventually becoming “His Excellency President for Life, Field Marshal Alhaji Dr. Idi Amin Dada, VC, DSO, MC, CBE.” Uganda’s foreign policy swung wildly: a country that had taken a pro-Western, pro-Israeli stance soon struck up a close relationship with the Soviet Union and Muammar al-Qaddafi’s Libya and openly supported terrorists. At home, Amin expelled Uganda’s Asian minority and killed hundreds of thousands of civilians from rival ethnic groups. With his circle of support steadily shrinking, he blamed Tanzania for his country’s problems and, in 1978, invaded it. Tanzania promptly counterattacked, driving Amin into exile.

## **LIABILITIES AND ASSETS**

Some leaders drag their countries or causes down, needlessly reducing their performance on account of their own particular weaknesses. On paper, Ayman al-Zawahiri has the perfect résumé for the head of a terrorist group. As the journalist Lawrence Wright has recounted, Zawahiri formed his first terrorist cell in 1966, when he was only 15 years old, to plot against the Egyptian regime. He then spent several years in Egypt’s jails, moved to Pakistan to aid the anti-Soviet jihad in Afghanistan, and was by Osama bin Laden’s side in Pakistan when al Qaeda was founded, in 1988. So when U.S. forces finally caught up to bin Laden in 2011, Zawahiri was the obvious successor as leader of the terrorist group.

Yet al Qaeda’s star has dimmed under Zawahiri’s leadership. Although the fall of secular autocrats, such as Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak, and the outbreak of civil wars around the Arab world presented a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity for jihad’s leading



brand, it was a rival group—ISIS—that seized the day. Whereas bin Laden tried to transcend the divisions within the jihadi movement, Zawahiri often aggravates them, especially by denouncing his rivals. Zawahiri's public statements betray a pedantic tone, an overbearing manner, and impatience with critics. Those who met bin Laden often described him as charismatic. No one says that about Zawahiri. Not surprisingly, al Qaeda has stagnated on his watch: the core organization has not conducted a major attack in the West for over a decade, and its affiliates tend to shun the global jihadi agenda in favor of local concerns.

The United States has hunted Zawahiri since the mid-1990s, and it is useful to consider what might have happened had it knocked him out. His replacement might have tried to make the movement more appealing by establishing his own credentials as a warrior. Perhaps he

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*Even mature liberal democracies are not immune to the charms of a dominant personality.*

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might have made al Qaeda more like its eventual rival, ISIS, by coming out of hiding to join the fight directly, planning more attacks in the West, or engaging in more gruesome behavior, such as beheadings. Or another leader might have moved away from al Qaeda's global

agenda, embracing the local and regional politics favored by many al Qaeda affiliates. But it seems unlikely that he would have done what Zawahiri has: giving uninspiring speeches while ISIS takes over the leadership of the global jihadi movement.

Other leaders, by contrast, punch above their weight. Exhibit A might be Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed, or MBZ, the crown prince of Abu Dhabi and the de facto leader of the United Arab Emirates. Once, the country's foreign policy consisted of trying to keep its head down and get even richer, following Saudi Arabia wherever it went. Although the UAE has a population of just ten million (only a tenth of whom are actually UAE citizens), under MBZ, it has reshaped the Middle East. MBZ helped engineer the 2013 coup in Egypt, intervened in Yemen to turn back the advance of the Houthi rebels, pushed the blockade of Qatar, and backed a warlord in Libya's civil war who is now banging on the gates of Tripoli. Thanks to MBZ's military reforms, UAE forces demonstrated surprising competence in the fighting in Yemen, which made the UAE, for a time, the dominant player in much of the country. In a chaotic region, MBZ has managed to leverage his country's wealth and military prowess to make the UAE thrive.

## **PUTTING PEOPLE FIRST**

Individuals aren't everything, of course: countries still have national interests, domestic politics, bureaucracies, and other forces that can play profound, even overwhelming, roles in shaping foreign policy. Yet it is equally facile to use such terms as "national interests," "domestic politics," and "bureaucratic resistance" without recognizing how leaders create, bend, exploit, override, or succumb to these factors.

Consider how individuals interact with institutions. If MBS had somehow come to power in a Saudi Arabia that was a mature liberal democracy, for example, he would no doubt have had a harder time fundamentally reorienting his country. In autocracies, which by definition lack democratic checks and balances, it is particularly easy for leaders to dominate policymaking. But autocracies can also produce weak leaders who merely reflect the impulses of their countries' bureaucracies, militaries, or ruling elites. Algerian President Abdelaziz Bouteflika remained in power for years even though he was nearly comatose, serving as a front for the country's political elite until he resigned at the age of 82, earlier this year. Meanwhile, the likes of a Putin or an Erdogan can step into a more pluralistic system and bend it to his will.

Even mature liberal democracies are not immune to the charms of a dominant personality. Today, U.S. President Franklin Roosevelt is revered as a demigod, but in his day, he was denounced for all manner of highhanded and dictatorial behavior, ranging from trying to pack the Supreme Court to enacting supposedly socialist economic policies. Before the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, Roosevelt shaped popular sentiment when he rearmed the country, offered the United Kingdom military aid, and pushed Japan to the brink, paving the way for the eventual U.S. entry into World War II. Roosevelt remade the United States' institutions as much as he was constrained by them, using his economic policies to expand the federal government's power and the war to lay the groundwork for the country's subsequent global military dominance. As the philosopher Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote, "An institution is the lengthened shadow of one man."

In his own way, Trump has also laid bare the limits of institutions. Whereas Roosevelt cajoled, guided, and shaped American institutions, Trump has derided and corroded them, largely on behalf of his own ego and prejudices. Yes, the American bureaucracy has saved

this president from some of his worst instincts—for instance, talking him out of withdrawing troops from Syria and quitting NATO. Yet contrary to his appointees' advice, his party's long-standing preferences, and even his own political interests, Trump has dramatically altered the course of U.S. foreign policy. He has rejected the Paris climate accord and the Trans-Pacific Partnership, walked away from the Iran nuclear deal, raised tariffs on China, rooted for far-right candidates in European elections, and moved the U.S. embassy in Israel to Jerusalem. At home, Trump has revealed that many supposed traditions of American politics—such as refusing to hire your relatives, pretending to be upset by corruption, revealing your personal financial activities, not threatening to arrest your political opponents, and promptly filling important cabinet positions—are powerless against a wrecking ball. His tenure has been marked by thoughtlessness and chaos; this does not appear to be a well-crafted plot.

Individuals can rise above institutions, norms, systemic forces, and domestic politics, leaving their countries stronger or weaker than they might otherwise have been. Leaders can create new enemies or friends, weaken or strengthen alliances, disregard norms, or take risks when others might have balked. They can fundamentally alter the national aspirations and overarching strategies of a country. Otto von Bismarck rendered Germany peaceful and a pillar of the European status quo; his successor, Kaiser Wilhelm, made Germany the greatest threat to European stability and the main instigator of World War I.

Once the role of individuals is taken into account, politics becomes less certain and more contingent than simple models of international relations might have it. In good times, this insight should make one cautious, since one man or woman in the wrong place at the wrong time can set a country on a dangerous course. In bad times, however, faith in the power of individuals can serve as a source of hope. For although leaders can make the world more dangerous, they can also make the world safer and more prosperous. In a democracy at least, this means that while choosing leaders is a burdensome task, it is also one that everyone should welcome. 🌐

# REVIEWS & RESPONSES



*The disasters in Libya and Syria have helped Trump jettison the notion that the United States has any real responsibility for human rights beyond its borders.*  
— Peter Beinart

## Obama's Idealists

*Peter Beinart*

162

## The Virtue of Monopoly

*Felix Salmon*

184

## How a Caliphate Ends

*Anne Barnard*

170

## The New Masters of the Universe

*Paul Starr*

191

## What Is White America?

*Nell Irvin Painter*

177

## Recent Books

198



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# Obama's Idealists

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## American Power in Theory and Practice

---

*Peter Beinart*

---

*Tough Love: My Story of the Things Worth Fighting For*

BY SUSAN RICE. Simon & Schuster, 2019, 544 pp.

*The Education of an Idealist: A Memoir*

BY SAMANTHA POWER. Dey Street Books, 2019, 592 pp.

*The World as It Is: A Memoir of the Obama White House*

BY BEN RHODES. Random House, 2018, 428 pp.

The events that Susan Rice and Samantha Power describe in their new memoirs of their time in the Obama administration occurred only a few years ago. But they belong to a different age.

"That chart shook up the Principals Committee like nothing I have seen before or since," Rice writes in *Tough Love*. The chart estimated the number of people the Ebola virus might kill in Guinea, Liberia, and Sierra Leone. Rice, then national security adviser, goes on to describe how she helped convince the Pentagon to send almost 3,000 U.S. troops to West Africa to

fight the plague. To convince other nations to join the effort, she, President Barack Obama, and various cabinet officials "made scores of calls to incredulous counterparts" in foreign governments. For her part, Power, then ambassador to the United Nations, disregarded the pleas of her young son—who cried, "Mommy, I'm certain you will bring back Bola"—and flew to Liberia and Sierra Leone under strict medical supervision to help oversee the effort. Back at the White House, in an attempt to counteract mounting hysteria about the disease, Obama hosted Nina Pham, a Texas nurse who had been successfully treated for Ebola. When she arrived at the Oval Office, he greeted her with a hug.

During the Obama administration, U.S. policymakers afforded Africa a level of concern and respect that was unprecedented in American history and is unimaginable in the Trump era. This attention to Africa reflected not merely a geographic orientation but an ideological one: a belief that human security, even in the poorest and weakest of states, matters to U.S. national security.

Rice, who began her career working on Africa policy in the Clinton administration, made eight official trips to the continent while serving as Obama's first ambassador to the UN. When South Sudan gained independence, in 2011, she hosted "a loud, super-sweaty dance party on the twenty-second floor of the new U.S. mission building where Americans, South Sudanese, African delegates and many others boogied long into the evening." Before the Obama administration, no U.S. cabinet official had ever visited the tiny Central African Republic. In an effort to contain religious violence there, Power,

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**PETER BEINART** is a contributor to *The Atlantic*, a columnist at the *Forward*, and a Professor at the City University of New York.

who became UN ambassador when Rice took over the National Security Council (NSC), visited four times. Try to imagine that happening under President Donald Trump.

But while it's poignant that less than a decade ago top U.S. officials cared enough about South Sudan to dance the night away celebrating its independence, American goodwill didn't keep the newborn country from collapsing into civil war. Rice doesn't hide her disappointment. In fact, disappointment is a theme of the memoirs by Rice and Power, as well as of the one published in 2018 by Obama's top foreign policy speechwriter, Ben Rhodes. The three books intimately evoke the personal journeys of Obama's former advisers and their frustration in encountering what Rhodes, in his title, calls "the world as it is." In so doing, the memoirs end up chronicling both the decline of American power and the decline of American exceptionalism: the belief that the United States is immune to the tribalism and authoritarianism that plague other parts of the world.

### YES WE CAN?

In different ways, each book traces a narrative arc that begins with a vow, made in young adulthood, to use the United States' might for good and ends with a sober realization about how hard fulfilling that vow actually is. For Rice, the arc begins with her failure, as a young NSC aide, to rouse the Clinton administration to halt the 1994 Rwandan genocide, after which she pledged "to go down fighting, if ever I saw another instance where I believed U.S. military intervention could . . . make a critical difference in saving large numbers of

human lives." For Power, it starts during her time as a war correspondent in Bosnia, where the besieged residents of Sarajevo asked her to "tell Clinton" about the horrors she had seen. For Rhodes, it begins with 9/11 and the Iraq war, which left him yearning to harness the idealism he felt the Bush administration had squandered.

In each book, three moments during the Obama administration play outsize roles in chastening this youthful idealism: the decision to bomb Libya in 2011, the decision not to bomb Syria in 2013, and the 2016 election.

As Rice notes, the Arab Spring opened a generational divide within the Obama foreign policy team. When an uprising began in Libya, and Muammar al-Qaddafi's forces closed in on the city of Benghazi to crush it, the administration's Gen-Xers, who had come of age during the genocides in Bosnia and Rwanda, pushed for military action. In a meeting in the Situation Room, Power handed Rhodes a note warning that, as he paraphrases it, Libya would be "the first mass atrocity that took place on our watch." Rice, then UN ambassador, recalls telling Obama that he "should not allow what could be perceived as his Rwanda to occur." A phalanx of older policymakers—Vice President Joe Biden, Defense Secretary Robert Gates, National Security Adviser Thomas Donilon, and White House Chief of Staff William Daley—warned against entering another Middle Eastern war. But aided by Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, the young idealists won. The United States and its allies saved Benghazi and helped topple Qaddafi. *The New York Times* reported that Libyan parents—who had

seen Rice vote at the UN to authorize military action—were naming their children after her.

Then, as in South Sudan, things fell apart. As Rice admits, post-Qaddafi Libya became “a state without an effective government, and an exporter of refugees.” Rival militias have now carved up the country, and the chaos has proved fertile ground for the Islamic State, or ISIS. Given the effort that Rice, Power, and Rhodes devoted to ensuring that the United States intervened in Libya—and the importance each accorded to humanitarian intervention in general—their explanations for postwar Libya’s woes are frustratingly skimpy and vague. Rhodes discusses the 2012 attack on U.S. facilities in Benghazi that ensnared him and Rice in a Fox News–fueled pseudo-scandal, but he says virtually nothing about what happened to postwar Libya itself. Rice acknowledges that the administration “failed to try hard enough and early enough to win the peace.” Power suggests that it “could have exerted more aggressive, high-level pressure on Libya’s neighbors to back a unified political structure” after Qaddafi’s fall.

But why didn’t it? Rice offers a clue when she writes, “in Washington, lingering ambivalence among some Principals about the original operation led the NSC to convene few Principals Committee meetings at a time when our efforts might have had a maximum impact” in stabilizing post-Qaddafi Libya. Since the national security adviser convenes such meetings, that sounds like a dig at Rice’s predecessor in the job, Donilon. It can also be read as a veiled jab at Obama himself, who showed little

appetite for a protracted commitment once Qaddafi was gone.

There’s a reason Rice isn’t more forthright. In her prologue, she announces, “Tell-all books, which sell copies at the expense of others, are tacky and not my style.” Power and Rhodes are equally polite. Unfortunately, their good manners come at the reader’s expense.

The problem isn’t that Rice, Power, and Rhodes shade the truth to make themselves look good. To the contrary, all three are, at various points, admirably frank about their mistakes. The problem is that by refusing to reveal what happened behind closed doors, they fail to help readers understand what lessons to draw from the Libya debacle. Is the lesson that presidents who lack the stomach for nation building shouldn’t topple regimes? Is it that the United States needs greater diplomatic capacity? Is it that brutal dictatorships are better than failed states? By not explaining Libya’s lessons, liberal internationalists like Rice, Power, and Rhodes make it easier for nativist bigots like Trump to proffer a lesson of their own: that Washington should care less about people overseas, especially if they are not Christian or white.

The second event that dampens the idealism of all three authors is Syria, a catastrophe over which, Rice writes, “my heart and my conscience will forever ache.” Rhodes supported Obama’s decision to pull back from the military strikes he had authorized in response to Bashar al-Assad’s chemical weapons attack in 2013. Rice and Power opposed it, the former more forcefully. But the more significant divergence came not over how the United States should respond to one chemical attack



but over how it should respond to Syria's ghastly civil war itself. Power urged "a no-fly zone over select areas of Syria that were under opposition control," even though that would have required destroying Syria's air defenses, which, according to the Pentagon, were five times as strong as Libya's. Rice, by contrast, suggests that the mistake lay not in doing too little but in promising too much. Perhaps, she proposes, the Obama administration should "have avoided declaratory statements such as 'Assad must go' or red lines as on chemical weapons that raised expectations for actions that may not have served U.S. interests." Rhodes wearily concurs. He calls Syria "a place where our inaction was a tragedy, and our intervention would only compound the tragedy."

In these brief statements, one can glimpse the embryo of a debate about state sovereignty, U.S. interests, and human rights. To protect Syrians from their murderous regime, Power proposed effectively dismembering the Syrian state. The obvious question is whether the American people—who didn't even support missile strikes in retaliation for Assad's use of chemical weapons—

would have backed a U.S. commitment to, essentially, defend a chunk of Syrian territory against the Syrian government. Rice, by contrast, seems to have reluctantly moved toward the view that if brutal leaders like Qaddafi and Assad threaten their own citizens but not the United States, then it is better to let them quash dissent than to launch an intervention that Washington can't sustain and that may produce a failed state. At times, it appears that Obama agreed. "Maybe we never would have done Rwanda," he tells Rhodes at one point.

This shadow debate is important. Among the lessons young liberals such as Rice, Power, and Rhodes took from Bosnia and Rwanda is that defending human rights can require infringing on state sovereignty. Among the lessons of Libya and Syria is that state collapse can be as brutal as state repression. These disasters have helped Trump jettison the notion that the United States has any real responsibility for human rights beyond its borders, and they have helped him outline an international vision in which sovereignty is king.



What Democrats think about sovereignty is less clear. Rice and Rhodes appear more willing than Power to declare the end of the era of humanitarian military intervention. But the debate is not just about military force. In an age of declining U.S. power, is it morally necessary or strategically productive for the United States to challenge other countries' sovereignty—in such places as Hong Kong, Xianjing, and Kashmir—in the name of human rights? The next Democratic president will face a version of that question but won't find much guidance in these three books.

In each, the saga of disillusionment reaches its nadir in 2016, with Russia's electoral interference and Trump's election. After witnessing the limits of the United States' ability to defend democracy and human rights abroad, Rice, Power, and Rhodes realize to their horror the limits of its ability to defend those principles at home. When Obama asks Mitch McConnell, the Republican Senate majority leader, to issue a joint statement condemning Russian interference in the election, McConnell refuses, a move that Rhodes calls "staggeringly partisan and unpatriotic." Near the end of her book, Power acknowledges, "While I once viewed the conflict in Bosnia as a last gasp of ethnic chauvinism and demagoguery from a bygone era, it now seems more of a harbinger of the way today's autocrats and opportunists exploit grievances . . . in order to expand their own power." Rice, in the final pages of her book, veers from foreign policy to a call for unity, civility, and decency at home.

Although none of the authors puts it this way, it's possible to read their books not only as tales of tempered idealism but

also as chronicles of America's declining exceptionalism. In retrospect, the belief in democracy promotion and humanitarian intervention that Rice, Power, and Rhodes embraced early in their careers rested on a faith that democracy was stable at home. With that faith now eroded—and the United States battling its own rising tribalism, authoritarianism, and brutality—it is hard to imagine a book like Power's *A Problem From Hell*, a critique of the country's repeated failure to stop genocide, becoming the sensation it did in 2002. As Americans have grown more preoccupied with, and more pessimistic about, their own country's moral condition, they have turned inward. As a young woman, Power helped expose concentration camps in Bosnia. Today's young activists are exposing them in Texas. As of September, foreign policy has barely figured in the Democratic presidential debates.

Rice, Power, and Rhodes also end up chronicling the United States' declining power. In Libya in 2011, Russia stood aside and let Washington and its NATO allies wage war unimpeded, a continuation of a unipolar pattern established in the 1990s by U.S.-led interventions in the Persian Gulf and the Balkans. By 2015, Russia was not only thwarting the U.S. effort at regime change in Syria in the UN Security Council; it was sending its troops to do so on the battlefield. By 2016, Russia had brought its counter-offensive to American soil. Apparently convinced that Washington was trying to foment political revolution in Russia, President Vladimir Putin helped foment a political revolution inside the United States.

Even more striking than what Rice, Power, and Rhodes say about Russia is what they don't say about China. That Beijing figures so little in all three books is the clearest indication that they chronicle a different time. In retrospect, the entire post–Cold War era that framed the careers of Rice, Power, and Rhodes—an era in which U.S. foreign policy focused on counterterrorism, nuclear nonproliferation, democracy promotion, economic liberalization, and humanitarian intervention—may turn out to have been merely a parenthesis between superpower competitions.

### PORTRAITS AND MEMORIES

Rhodes offers the most intimate portrait of Obama. He describes the former president as conscientious, decent, and intellectually curious but not exactly warm—a man easier to admire than to feel close to. At times, Obama's almost inhuman discipline and self-control make him intolerant of the limitations of others. After Rhodes loses his razor on a 2011 trip to Latin America, Obama scolds him for not shaving. Rhodes fumes that the president “seemed oblivious to the work I was doing out of his sight, work that left me no time to buy a razor. But as I calmed down, I realized that . . . being composed and professional—*doing the job*—was how he managed to take everything in stride. I hadn't just failed to shave. I'd deviated from his ethos of unflappability.” In another scene, Rhodes reflects that Obama's tendency to eat the same meal again and again (salmon, brown rice, and broccoli) “said something about his discipline—food was something that sustained his health and energy in this job, not something

## I.B. TAURIS



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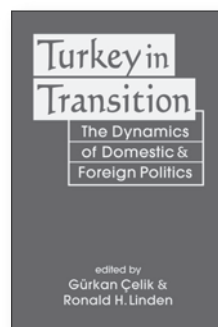
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to be enjoyed.” Rhodes, by contrast, douses his anxiety with late-night drinking and TV binge watching.

Unlike Rhodes, neither Rice nor Power discusses the Obama administration in detail until the second half of her book. In both cases, it’s a shrewd decision. Because both women are loath to offend former colleagues, they can’t offer an unvarnished portrait of the personalities and struggles behind Obama’s foreign policy. Each compensates for this literary problem in the same way: by offering a strikingly unvarnished portrait of her own life.

Power’s talent as a writer comes through most eloquently in the book’s opening chapters, when she describes her relationship with her magnetic, alcoholic father. “Guinness,” she writes, “the dark brown, silky stout with the thick, pillowy head—was not just his drink; it was his craft.” She recounts the long afternoons she spent as a child reading, singing, and basking in her father’s love in Hartigan’s, a Dublin bar that “had a smell that mingled urine, chlorine disinfectant, and the swirl of barley, malt, and hops.” When Power’s mother, fearful that Ireland’s sexist legal system would not allow her to divorce, snuck out of the country with Samantha and her brother in tow, her father began a slow suicide that ended with the discovery of her “dad’s decomposing body amid the stench of vomit and human waste.” Thirty years later, when Power—now a famous author and Obama adviser—returns to Hartigan’s, she asks a longtime bartender why her father let alcohol take his life. The bartender’s answer: “Because you left.”

Rice lacks Power’s literary gifts. At times, her prose reads like the transcript

of a Sunday show. But she, too, writes affectingly about a childhood that combined deep love and deep trauma. The similarities between Rice’s and Power’s upbringings are striking. Each woman’s mother battled to build a career in a punishingly sexist milieu. Each woman’s brilliant but controlling father objected, which spawned affairs, which spawned an ugly divorce, which each girl witnessed up close. As her parents’ fighting grew more violent, Rice remembers worrying that her mother would kill herself. Power writes about getting on her knees and saying Hail Marys and Our Fathers while her parents hurled dishes at each other in the kitchen.

Terrified and precocious, each girl tried to save her parents’ marriage. “Starting at seven years old,” Rice writes, “I appointed myself chief firefighter, mediator, and judge, working to defuse arguments, broker compromises, and bring rationality to bear when emotion overwhelmed reason.” Power remembers brandishing a 50-pence piece she had been saving and telling her parents, “Whichever of you doesn’t argue with the other will get this.” She added, “I will be watching.” It’s easy to see the foreshadowing. If Rice and Power endured bitter disappointment when their best efforts couldn’t prevent Libya, Syria, or South Sudan from disintegrating, they were at least well prepared.

#### WHAT’S LEFT UNSAID

At times, it’s frustrating that Rice and Power aren’t as self-reflective about American foreign policy as they are about themselves. When describing how Afghan President Hamid Karzai accused U.S. soldiers of abusing Afghan civilians, Rice calls it a “typical but

never tolerable rant” without presenting any evidence that Karzai was wrong. She boasts about having “spearheaded efforts to prevent Palestine from being admitted prematurely to the UN as a full member state (a status it sought in order to bypass negotiations for a two-state solution)” and about having vetoed a 2011 resolution declaring Israeli settlements illegal because it was “an unhelpful diversion that could set back efforts to press the two parties to negotiate directly.”

This is wildly unconvincing. Given Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu’s blatant hostility to the creation of a viable Palestinian state, the Palestinians—having lived without basic rights for a half century—had every right to appeal to the UN. It’s depressing that, even now, Rice won’t grapple with the moral perversity of the policy she carried out. Power, for her part, avoids Israel almost entirely, even though her abstention on a later settlement resolution, in the Obama administration’s waning days, was among the most controversial actions of her UN tenure. Israel doesn’t even have its own heading in her book’s index. Rhodes comes closest to acknowledging that in making policy toward Israel, political expediency often trumped conviction. “Netanyahu,” he writes, “had mastered a certain kind of leverage: using political pressure within the United States to demoralize any meaningful push for peace.” But even Rhodes never gives himself the intellectual and moral license to imagine a U.S. policy unfettered by political limitations.

It’s easy to understand these choices. Since questioning the United States’ virtually unconditional support for

Israel can imperil a policymaker’s hope of ever serving in government again, it is not surprising that Rice, Power, and, to a lesser degree, Rhodes play it safe in their books. But in so doing, they fail to acknowledge the uncomfortable ways in which Trump’s disregard for human rights represents a continuation of—rather than a break from—the policies of the government in which they served. The price of entry for continued public service is discretion. The price of entry for serious policy discussion is honesty. Both are legitimate choices. But there’s a tension between the two. Rice, Power, and Rhodes chose discretion, which undermines the quality of their analysis.

Perhaps it is fitting that in memoirs that describe the many constraints under which the Obama administration labored, Rice, Power, and Rhodes manifest those constraints themselves by failing to challenge one of the most politically treacherous, and least morally defensible, aspects of American foreign policy. This too, evidently, is part of what Power, in her book’s title, calls “the education of an idealist.” One can only hope that in the future, it’s an education that able and decent policymakers like them will feel comfortable doing without. 🌐



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# How a Caliphate Ends

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## On the Frontline of the Fight Against ISIS

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*Anne Barnard*

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*They Will Have to Die Now: Mosul and the Fall of the Caliphate*

BY JAMES VERINI. Norton, 2019, 304 pp.

**T**he origin story that James Verini tells about his new book, *They Will Have to Die Now*, is about guilt—his guilt for not having gone to Iraq earlier. On 9/11, in his first newspaper job, he covered the collapse of the Twin Towers. He writes that a couple of years later, he “could have, should have, gone to Iraq but didn’t.” He was, he says, “too scared.”

It’s just as well that Verini waited until 2016 to “face Iraq” and start reporting on what he calls the central American war of our time. For one thing, obviously yet still shockingly, even arriving 13 years late, he didn’t miss it. For another, he eventually learned a key lesson for a reporter: being scared doesn’t make you the wrong person for the job. Verini’s deeply reported, beautifully written first-person account

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**ANNE BARNARD** is a reporter at *The New York Times*, where she was Beirut Bureau Chief from 2012 to 2018. Earlier, she served as Baghdad Bureau Chief and Middle East Bureau Chief at *The Boston Globe*.

results from many months on an extremely dangerous assignment. To cover the pivotal fight to dislodge the Islamic State, or ISIS, from Mosul, a city of one million to two million people in northern Iraq, he embedded with Iraqi government troops, who, for all the years, money, and lives that Washington spent training them as U.S. proxies, tend to be cheerfully uninterested in basic force-protection measures such as setting perimeters and over-watch points.

Arriving late also means seeing the conflict with fresh eyes. Many American journalists of my generation who shipped out to Central Asia and the Middle East after President George W. Bush’s declaration of the dubiously named “war on terror” are now pushing two decades on the beat. The intervening years have brought distance—even freedom, if one dares use that Iraq-war-tainted word—from the post-9/11 confusion in which “America, in its fear, in its shame,” as Verini writes, attacked Iraq. The original sin of the U.S. invasion and the mistakes of the occupation that we reported on are now, while not beside the point, almost as distant from today as the Vietnam War was from the United States’ first Iraq adventure, in 1990–91.

Verini thus arrives in medias res to a country “whose story,” he writes, “had been entwined with my country’s story for a generation now, for most of my life, so entwined that neither place any longer made sense without the other.” True, although most Americans fail to think much about the war’s effects on their own country. Iraqis do not have that luxury.

In today’s Iraq, American intervention is less an event than a condition, less an alien encounter than a problematic



*The boys are back in town: Iraqi security forces liberating the village of Khalidiya, October 2016*

marriage. The Iraqi troops and civilians Verini befriends and profiles have lived lives permeated by the war far more deeply than are those of Americans who have spent entire military careers fighting it. Their generosity in trying to forge mutual understanding with Verini, “a person from the place that had made their lives a hell,” was, he writes, “humanity itself.” At first glance, his book reads like any narrative of life with the troops, full of worm’s-eye details on war’s chaos and boredom and absurdity, with vivid portraits of soldiers and their black humor. But these are Iraqi troops, and Verini intersperses the scenes with historical research from the earliest annals of war—some visible in Mosul’s own archaeological past—to records of more recent episodes that explain why many citizens offered at least passive support to ISIS.

So his account of Iraqis, both soldiers and civilians, feels fresh, and it presents an occasion to examine the broader questions posed by the conflict’s recent events: What works and what doesn’t, after 16 years of attempts by foreigners and locals to pacify Iraq? What happens on the ground as the United States outsources the foot soldiering of its wars? Is ISIS really defeated, or are years of violence in the name of fighting terrorism likely to continue unrolling new, expanding chapters of conflict with that group and others?

#### **FROM WASHINGTON TO BAGHDAD**

As he follows one mostly Muslim army into a war against another, Verini doesn’t bother with tired questions about Islam and whether there is something uniquely pathological about Arabs or Muslims.

He does situate the rise of ISIS in age-old atavistic impulses. Not Islamic ones or Middle Eastern ones but human ones—the violence that springs from power struggles, revenge, bloodlust. In the gory battle scenes memorialized in Assyrian friezes in Nineveh, the ancient city that lay near modern-day Mosul, Verini sees parallels to the gruesome photos and videos Iraqis shared by smartphone. “Everyone knew someone who’d been killed on the Internet,” he writes.

Verini seeks to temper the hype about ISIS, and he cuts it down to size, portraying it as just the latest insurgent group to use terrorism as a tool for political goals. He recalls that it has been over a century since jihadism became a vehicle for anticolonialism, reminding readers of the Royal Air Force’s efforts to put down the Iraqi revolt that began in 1920, a movement that, like the rebels who fought the British in Sudan decades earlier, invoked the Almighty against an occupier. “Fifteen years before Guernica,” Verini writes, “the British were bombing unarmed Iraqis.” Nor is ISIS even the first insurgent group to promote an apocalyptic worldview. He mentions the Jewish rebels who fought the Romans in the first centuries BC and AD and ultimately committed mass suicide on Masada.

As Verini notes, many news organizations milked the ISIS story for its “luridness,” yielding shallow coverage “on the same spectrum as the Caliphate’s own blood porn.” (He acknowledges “a few exceptions”; in fact, there are many brave journalists who reported with context and measure.) Some outlets, he muses, may have sought to absolve themselves of their lack of skepticism before the U.S. invasion, as

if to say, as he puts it, “See, I knew all along there was something horrible lurking in the desert there.”

But it is instructive to look even more broadly at the successes and failures of writers who have tried to make sense of the chaos consuming Iraq and Syria. Too often, we approach it like the proverbial blind men assessing an elephant: the one at the tail thinks it is like a rope, the one at the leg says it is like a tree, and so on. Each arena of the sprawling conflicts poses its own challenges of access and safety. Few people have seen every aspect from the ground, and no book has satisfyingly pulled it all together. Verini focuses on Iraq and men. A recent book by Azadeh Moaveni looks mainly at women who joined ISIS in Syria.

Yet neither Iraq nor Syria fully makes sense without the other. The details of the hostilities in Syria, where the conflict began not with ISIS but with President Bashar al-Assad’s violent repression of a civilian protest movement, are very different from those of the war in Iraq. At the same time, Iraqis and Syrians share a sense of abandonment and abuse by their governments and the world, and their conflicts have become inseparable. The Bush administration’s misadventure in Iraq was the reason the Obama administration was unable or unwilling to take decisive action to stop atrocities in Syria: the United States was constrained by depleted resources, a war-weary population, the discrediting of its rhetoric about democracy and human rights, and its own undermining of international institutions and multilateralism. During the U.S. occupation of Iraq, Assad’s weaponization of Syrian extremists to harass American soldiers in Iraq helped seed

what became ISIS. Assad later imprisoned some of those same fighters, only to reuse them later on. Early in the Syrian revolt, even as he vacuumed civilian activists and army defectors into his torture dungeons, he released jihadis who went on to lead hardcore militant groups, making it easier for him to claim that the world had to choose between him and “the terrorists.”

Going back further, had the United States not invaded Iraq, the country would almost certainly not have become a breeding ground, and later a sitting duck, for ISIS. In fact, it’s possible to imagine that without the invasion, the uprisings that swept the Arab world beginning in late 2010, or at least the one that swept Syria, would have gone somewhat better. Perhaps—dream for a moment—an Iraqi revolt against Saddam Hussein could have taken root organically, in partnership with the Syrian one. Instead, in the rubble left by invasion, Iraq was riddled with Sunni extremists, who dispatched emissaries across the border into Syria to radicalize the population there. A weak Iraq permeated by Iranian power also made it easy for Iran to recruit legions of Iraqi Shiite militants and dispatch them across the border into Syria to help Assad put down the revolt.

There is more to learn on the ground that requires the whole picture. There has yet to be a systematic study of whether the United States’ ordnance has really done better than Assad’s at sorting fighters from civilians, especially since the Trump administration loosened the rules of engagement. There is also a need for a closely observed account of the United States’ messy alliances. The country treats Iran-backed

militias as *de facto* allies in Iraq but as enemies in Syria, where U.S. proxies, in turn, are led by Kurdish groups that Turkey, a fellow NATO member, considers terrorists.

Moreover, combat books can only go so far in documenting the plight of civilians; in Verini’s, anecdotes of officers jauntily disregarding danger, or of the soldiers obscenely taunting one another about their sisters, sometimes blur together or narrowly avoid cheer-leading. (I pine for a frontline book by a female serial embedder, such as Jane Arraf, Arwa Damon, or Kathy Gannon, although the Iraqi military lags behind its U.S. counterpart in letting women reporters take equal risks as men.)

To bridge these epistemological gaps, journalists have new tools: social media and other digital communications. However misused these have been, civilians, activists, and rank-and-file fighters, in Syria especially, have turned them into an unprecedented platform to tell the story of their own conflicts in real time, making Syria arguably history’s most documented war. I wish in hindsight that in the early years of the Iraq war, then faceless insurgents and the civilians caught between them and U.S. firepower could have contacted us directly. Yet even in recent years, online communications have not been used as early or as extensively in Iraq, perhaps for as simple a reason as that different teams of reporters typically cover the two countries, and those working in Iraq were not as used to those tools. And in Syria, social media have sometimes obscured important dynamics. Before the 2013 takeover of Raqqa by ISIS and the subsequent beheadings, foreign jihadis heralded the arrival of the group with



goofy selfies, making it initially appear to be a buffoonish sideshow in a crowded field of more conventional actors.

In Iraq, however, where ISIS and its predecessors had incubated for years, the group's rise was plain to see amid Iraq's political disorder. Journalists saw it, but strained news budgets meant shrinking coverage as the United States, briefly it turned out, withdrew.

### WHY THEY FIGHT

Verini does an excellent job of describing the Iraqi leg of the elephant and his starting point: guilt. He assigns much of it to U.S. policies and the leaders in Iraq and elsewhere whom those policies have supported or tolerated. Yes, the United States helped create ISIS, not in the literal way that conspiracy theorists believe but by destabilizing Iraq, ruling it clumsily, and then supporting the scorched-earth, sectarian approach of Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki. Verini reminds readers of how, during the run-up to the invasion, U.S. Secretary of State Colin Powell elevated the obscure Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, who would found the group that became ISIS, to a jihadi celebrity by citing him in his famous speech before the UN Security Council. And Verini explains how ISIS exploited the Maliki government's corruption, bribing or co-opting officials as it raised money, infiltrated institutions, and amassed weapons, even as it denounced graft to gain popularity. By the time ISIS took over Mosul in 2014, the group was the only real alternative to Maliki, and some Moslawis, given their lived experience, decided it was worth a try. Amid their political, security, and economic rationales, one researcher tells Verini, "religious ideology might have

been the last point of identification with the Islamic State."

This observation hits home in the operatic story of two middle-aged, middle-class brothers in a refugee camp who initially welcomed ISIS. Abu Omar's wife was killed by al Qaeda militants in 2005. His brother Abu Fahad, a former army medic, also lost his wife, who was killed the next year when U.S. and Kurdish troops shot up the family car at a checkpoint. After they beat him, Abu Fahad found his eldest daughter "in the backseat of the car trying to eat shards of window glass"; she had just "watched her mother's head explode." "Abu Fahad wasn't a zealot," Verini writes. "He wasn't even particularly devout." He continues:

But he had watched his country invaded, occupied, turned upon itself; his city degraded from a "paradise," as he described the Mosul of his youth, to a hell; his wife killed; himself and his family and friends humiliated by soldiers of the army he'd once nursed to health; his children driven mad, denigrated, denied futures. To a man like that, sane as he is, talk of a millenarian utopia, of any utopia, of any improvement of life beyond the malediction it has become, holds promise.

Verini also gives deserved attention to the heavy sacrifices and bravery of the Iraqi forces. Twenty thousand Iraqi troops died between 2014 and 2016 alone. One gunner, known as "Sponge-Bob," a nickname bestowed on him by his young son, had earlier survived torture by a Shiite militia, despite being Shiite himself. During the fight for Mosul, he was evaporated by a suicide

bomb—recalling, in my mind, a line from the World War II poet Randall Jarrell: “When I died they washed me out of the turret with a hose.”

Verini travels mostly with the Counter Terrorism Service, a group of special operations forces that reports to Iraq’s prime minister and that U.S. officials viewed as the most competent and least politicized Iraqi unit. Yet at every turn, he finds the unevenness of twenty-first-century warfare—the same type of disconnect and confusion that leads sophisticated drones to hit wedding parties in Afghanistan and Yemen. The Iraqis working on the ground beneath high-tech U.S. jets carry homemade mortar tubes, forget to take the wrapping off grenade launchers, wear misspelled shoulder patches, and shun body armor. Verini watches them work with Western special forces officers to call in airstrikes from an alarmingly exposed command post, communicating on WhatsApp. Operational security concerns aside, Verini wonders about uncounted civilian casualties. Watching impact clouds bloom across Mosul, he observes that in the Pentagon’s claim of scrupulous precision, “you had to smell horseshit.”

Verini doesn’t dig deeply into this but cites others’ reports: one airstrike said to target an ISIS position during the battle for Mosul killed as many as 150 civilians, according to Amnesty International and local witnesses quoted in several news outlets; a *New York Times* investigation published in 2017 found that one in five airstrikes by the anti-ISIS coalition resulted in unintended civilian deaths, 31 times the rate the Pentagon claimed. The book also adds to growing evidence that even the

best Iraqi units summarily execute prisoners. One of Verini’s most likable characters, a chubby-cheeked major named Hassan, casually admits to one such killing and then shows Verini the body. The episode comes near the end of the book and gets short shrift. I wanted more on how Verini assimilated the execution into his understanding of his frontline companions and on how common such killings were.

#### **AFTER ISIS**

*They Will Have to Die Now* documents the practical application of a popular theory informing much of U.S. policy: that having locals fight wars engenders less resentment. But this doesn’t always hold true. Just like U.S. forces, Iraqis have struggled with the difficulty of saving a city without destroying it, and they have met with similar results. As Verini writes, “The more Moslawis were killed, the more they resented the soldiers, and the more soldiers were killed, the more they resented the Moslawis.” In some ways, the Iraqis’ challenge is worse than the Americans’, since they need to somehow live together, to envision shared citizenship with mortal enemies.

Mosul was recaptured in the summer of 2017, and the city is now in the throes of a slow rebuilding. Today, ISIS has been defeated militarily as a territorial entity and discredited by its misrule among those who gave it a chance as a government. But the political problems that allowed it to gain a foothold haven’t begun to be solved. And although its true believers have been dealt a setback, they are still available as recruits for decentralized attacks in Iraq, Syria, and worldwide.

As for the rest of Iraq, short of real trust, the best hope is the sharing of spoils and power. The country has a semblance of real politics—debate on governance that transcends sect—after the fight against ISIS created at least a partial sense of shared purpose. The absence of violence is a kind of success; in the city of Samarra, for instance, the Shiite militia run by Muqtada al-Sadr, who rose to prominence fighting American troops, is now keeping peace with a mostly Sunni population, partly by offering lucrative business opportunities to local Sunnis. In Syria, however, relative quiet has come through Assad's wholesale doubling down on repression. Elsewhere in the Middle East, Lebanon's rickety yet durable system, with sectarian mafias sharing rents a generation after the country's own civil war ended, somehow passes as a decent outcome. But it depends on perpetuating sectarian mistrust and precludes basic infrastructure investment, let alone a functional state, a shared political or physical public space, or meaningful levers for ordinary citizens to effect change. And that is in a country that is a fraction of the size of Iraq.

More important, instability and extremism will rear their heads in the Middle East as long as its people are denied a voice in how they are governed. The biggest long-term threat in the region is neither ISIS nor Iran but the continued *de facto* insistence by its own leaders that the path to security and stability is through rule by force. Decades of U.S. policy have implicitly endorsed that view. Washington maintains so-called counterterrorism alliances with despotic rulers in Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates.

It pursues policies on Israel that, by tolerating the expansion of Jewish settlements in the West Bank and adopting an increasingly one-sided approach to negotiations, have enshrined the indefinite occupation of the Palestinian territories. And by supporting or tolerating repressive governments, it has given a green light to the suppression of the very forces in the region—the young and educated and motivated—who briefly had the temerity to believe in and act on the universal ideals of freedom, human rights, and dignity that American rhetoric promoted, only to be crushed. Victory via maximum violence against both militants and civilians is no recipe for stability. What's worse, the example from Assad and others in the region has offered authoritarians around the world a grisly playbook for how to win. It also spurred a wave of refugees that sent racist identity politics rippling through Europe and the United States.

So Verini is right to talk about an entwined Iraq and America. Indeed, it is not too far a stretch to see versions of Iraqis' dilemmas within U.S. borders. How can armed fanatics and gunmen, who make common cause in the dark corners of social media and capitalize on its blurring of facts, be stopped? Are Americans facing their own apocalypse, from the climate? How can grievances and divisions be healed in a country, in a world, where people don't agree on the nature of reality? And after years of fear, what concerns are shared? Who is "them," and who is "us"? 🌐

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# What Is White America?

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## The Identity Politics of the Majority

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*Nell Irvin Painter*

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*White Shift: Populism, Immigration, and the Future of White Majorities*

BY ERIC KAUFMANN. Abrams Press, 2019, 624 pp.

*White Identity Politics*

BY ASHLEY JARDINA. Cambridge University Press, 2019, 384 pp.

*Dying of Whiteness: How the Politics of Racial Resentment Is Killing America's Heartland*

BY JONATHAN M. METZL. Basic Books, 2019, 352 pp.

**T**he U.S. presidential election of 2016 altered the prevailing American ideology of race. Donald Trump's coy, borderline white nationalism helped turn people who previously happened to be white into "white people"—coded as white in an essential way, just as, for instance, black people are coded as black in an essential way. Many observers were slow to grasp the political ramifications of

citizens who happen to be white voting first and foremost as white people. In the immediate aftermath of the election, commentators rushed to ascribe Trump's victory to economic disarray in the heartland and to a subset of voters lamenting their loss of jobs and stability. It took a couple of years for journalists, pollsters, and scholars to find a sounder explanation: by and large, most white Trump supporters were not voting out of economic self-interest; rather, they were resentful of social changes that threatened their taken-for-granted position atop a social hierarchy—despite the fact that the vast majority of those who held political power were white (and male), white families' wealth was still six and a half times as great as black families' wealth, and black families headed by college graduates had about 33 percent less wealth than white families headed by high school dropouts.

Three new books seek to validate this explanation and to answer a few crucial questions. What do these white people want? According to these authors, they want Trump, Brexit, guns, tax cuts, Republicans, Social Security, and Medicare. More than anything else, they want to protect their place atop society.

And what don't these white people want? Immigrants, Obamacare, and money for public schools. And above all, they don't want to be called bigots by multiculturalists; that kind of talk threatens them and encourages them to embrace white nationalism. They cannot imagine a multiracial society in which white people—however defined—peaceably take their place among others who are not white.

And who are these white people? That's what these books are about, and

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**NELL IRVIN PAINTER** is Edwards Professor of American History Emerita at Princeton University and the author of *The History of White People*.



that's what makes them both interesting and, ultimately, vexing. All three authors seem to believe that it is possible to understand whiteness ontologically, as a thing. But race is better understood as an ongoing discourse, not as a physical reality. Although racism and the discrimination that accompanies it clearly have measurable social and economic effects, race is a concept that should be described with verbs such as "to seem," as opposed to "to be." The belief in the reality of race as a biologically or otherwise fixed characteristic, however, is like the belief in witchcraft, as the sociologist Karen Fields said years ago: there's nothing one can say to disprove it. And, I would add, that belief produces clear political outcomes.

If there is no such thing as a stable, freestanding category of whites, how can one make convincing claims about whiteness and white identity politics? The solution to this problem, for these authors and many others, is to turn to data, measurements, charts, and graphs. Eric Kaufmann and Ashley Jardina analyze data from opinion surveys to make arguments about the roots of white resentment. Jonathan Metzl examines medical statistics and conducts interviews with individuals to understand why white-identifying people support a conservative political agenda that has had a deleterious effect on their own health and well-being. Kaufmann and Jardina focus on white identifiers' conservative politics but minimize the Republican Party's strategy of exploiting the enormous emotional power of whiteness to advance regressive taxation, limit the social safety net, and disempower workers. All three authors recognize that so long as white identity is

disconnected from economic (and, in the case of Metzl, biological) self-interest, politicians will remain free to pursue policies that benefit corporations and the wealthy but that do ordinary white people little good. But political issues that matter beyond white identity—for instance, voting rights and equal treatment under the law—hardly appear in these books. And none of the three books offers a convincing path out of the dangerous territory into which the United States has been thrust by white identity politics.

### **IF YOU'RE WHITE, YOU'RE ALRIGHT**

Kaufmann is a professor of politics at Birkbeck, University of London. He is an expert on the politics of Northern Ireland and thus brings a sense of history to the subject of white identity, which he terms "white ethno-traditionalism." His book deals mostly with the United States, but Canada and Europe also come into view. By his reckoning, race is a genetic fact, and in a manner reminiscent of nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century scientists' belief in temperamental differences based on race, he perceives a "white arch-type" that has certain recognizable cultural manifestations. He calls multicultural and multi-racial populations in Western countries "mixed-race" and uses the term "unmixed" with scare quotes but without irony.

Kaufmann explores the attitudes of white people who oppose immigrants and refugees and voted for Brexit or Trump and argues that most of them are not power hungry or antiblack. They're just normal human beings who, feeling threatened, are engaging in cultural self-defense. To prove that his claims rest on sound science, Kaufmann displays



*Majority rule: supporters at a Trump rally in New Hampshire, August 2019*

data in dozens of charts and graphs. But too often, they reduce or distort the reality they are supposed to represent. One chart, for example, shows two lines relating to the probability of someone voting for right-wing populists in a given country, correlated with whether the voter says safety is very important. The caption asserts that other variables were controlled for, but the reader is left wondering how that control has affected the stated probabilities. The graph offers no evidence for the direction of causation among the highlighted variables: the percentage of Muslims in the population, a person's level of concern for safety, and that person's propensity to vote for right-wing populist parties or candidates. But Kaufmann nonetheless suggests a particular causal direction, implying that the presence of Muslims stokes concerns about safety, which then encourage support for right-wing populists.

Kaufmann's main argument is that the kind of white identity politics that has taken the form of right-wing populism results from two threats: diversification through immigration, which reduces the size of the white majority, and an "anti-majority adversary culture" of "left-modernism," whose "most zealous exponents" inhabit college campuses, where they pursue their "mission of replacing 'whiteness' with diversity." Kaufmann claims that the "anti-white narrative" of "radical left-modernists" has pushed some white people beyond mere opposition to immigration into extremist theories of "white genocide." To help white-identified people pull back from such extremes, Kaufmann proposes remedies for the short and the long term. In essence, Kaufmann wants to save white people from themselves.

But some of his proposals seem less like antidotes to extremism and more

like accommodations to it. Take, for example, his suggestion for how to deal with the problems posed by refugees: keep them away from the majority white population and house them “on a long-term basis” in “camps” offering refuge but no prospect of permanent settlement. Such camps could be set up in “a less prosperous non-EU country like Albania.” Western countries that oppose refugees would be willing to fund such camps, he writes, because “they care more about the cultural impact of refugee settlement than the economic costs.”

Kaufmann’s long-term solution to prevent the spread of extremist white identity politics is to speed what he sees as an inevitable “white shift”: the emergence of a new definition of “white” that would include light-skinned people with heterogeneous ancestry and, at the same time, would conserve the “core myths and boundary symbols” of whiteness. Of course, this is a phenomenon that has appeared in U.S. history many times and in many guises. Over the centuries, as Kaufmann notes, definitions of whiteness have come to incorporate formerly denigrated groups, such as Irish Americans, Italian Americans, and Jewish Americans. Consider, too, the centuries-old practice of members of the many-hued African American population passing for white in a deeply racist society—a topic Kaufmann ignores. Kaufmann is surely correct that ideas about who counts as white are bound to change. In Kaufmann’s view, this shift will help maintain white supremacy. However, as I’ve written elsewhere, such an enlargement is in fact already weakening white supremacy by benefiting wealthy and educated people who do not identify as white.

To Kaufmann, the worries of “ethno-traditional nationalists” about “losing the country they know” are legitimate and not automatically worthy of condemnation. Those who condemn such thinking, he suggests, are peddling the “anti-white narrative” of the white-hating “modernist-left” and driving new followers into the arms of right-wing white nationalists. If these critics would just shut up, white people would settle down and admit other people into their world—provided they are light-skinned enough and willing to identify as white. But Kaufmann doesn’t explain how nonwhite people would fit into this new polity, with its newly entrenched and enlarged white majority. Nor, crucially, does he reflect on how such a polity would fare when it comes to protecting the fundamental values of liberal democracy.

## **FEAR FACTOR**

Less polemic and more modest than Kaufmann’s book, Jardina’s study applies multiple regression, the most widely used of all statistical methods, to opinion polling data. Jardina, an assistant professor of political science at Duke University, controls for variables representing resentment of blacks, partisanship, gender, region, and political ideology and proposes to measure the influence of the degree to which white Americans identify as white, stripped of all other characteristics. Her measure of white identity has five categories, ranging from “being white is not at all important to my identity” to “being white is extremely important to my identity.” Then she checks whether this measure of white identity allows her to predict political attitudes. It does.

She writes that perceived threats to white supremacy—a nonwhite U.S. president, a Latina justice of the U.S. Supreme Court, affirmative action, college courses on race—have made white people feel “outnumbered, disadvantaged, and even oppressed.” Political responses have followed, as white voters have supported strict immigration controls and voter identification laws that reduce minority turnout. According to Jardina’s analysis, a strong sense of white identification predicts negative attitudes toward immigration and positive attitudes toward Social Security, Medicare, and the policies of the Trump administration. But, Jardina contends, white identification alone does not predict opposition to policies and programs often viewed through a racial lens, such as affirmative action, welfare, and Medicaid. Rather, opposition to those things correlates with a strong sense of racial resentment that is distinct from merely identifying as white.

Jardina’s methodology of applying multiple regression to opinion polling data is widely used in political psychology and other social sciences. But its pitfalls are well known, the most obvious being the problem of determining causality when the effects of certain variables are very small and predictions are therefore hard to make with confidence. A second pitfall lies in this methodology’s inability to characterize change over time—to capture changing behaviors as populations adjust to one another. There is, further, the temptation to search among possible control variables or among variables to predict in order to find positive results. These pitfalls suggest that one should be skeptical of,

for example, Jardina’s assertion that “desires to preserve Social Security and Medicare are rooted in white racial solidarity”—a claim that seems to ignore the role of class and age in support for such programs.

Perhaps Jardina’s most important argument is that “white identity is not defined by racial animus, and whites who identify with their racial group are not simply reducible to bigots.” Without passing judgment, Jardina writes that many white identifiers resent the notion that “expressing their identity would be seen, unfairly, as problematic or even racist.” She cites as an example of this dynamic an episode in 2015 when a deli owner in New Jersey posted a sign at his business reading, “Celebrate your White Heritage in March. White History Month.” The deli owner was baffled when some of his neighbors excoriated his sign as racist. But it’s difficult to accept that support for a hypothetical White History Month would indicate nothing more than a blameless expression of white racial solidarity, portending no ill will toward other groups. After all, what might be celebrated during White History Month? Would it highlight heroic white people such as the Founding Fathers, even though they are already broadly celebrated? Would it commemorate events in U.S. history such as the American Revolution, which very much included people of color? Would it herald the ethnic cleansing of Native Americans justified by Manifest Destiny? Answering the question of what White History Month might look like in practice would reveal the antidemocratic dimension of white identity and demonstrate why it cannot be celebrated as though it were historically neutral.



## **WHAT'S THE MATTER WITH WHITE PEOPLE?**

It's not hard to see how ethnic and racial minorities—and the polity at large—might be harmed when white-identifying citizens decide to vote and organize specifically as white people. But to what extent does such political behavior actually benefit white people on an individual level? Metzl explores that question and finds that, at least in Kansas, Missouri, and Tennessee, white identity politics has resulted in physical and intellectual harm to some white people. Metzl, a medical doctor and a professor of sociology and psychiatry at Vanderbilt University, has produced a data-driven book that alternates between narrative and analysis. Metzl also relies on personal interviews to shed light on how public policy affects particular people and how they process the conflicts between their physical well-being and their political convictions. He wants to know why “lower- and middle-class white Americans vote against their own biological self-interest as well as their own economic priorities.”

Metzl begins in Tennessee with a white man he refers to as Trevor (Metzl uses pseudonyms throughout), who is poor, lacks health insurance, and suffers from an inflamed liver, hepatitis C, and jaundice. Trevor staunchly supports his state's refusal to embrace Obamacare by expanding Medicaid coverage, even though that refusal deprives him of the care he needs to save his life. “Of what was Trevor dying?” Metzl asks. The answer, he says, is the “toxic effects of dogma” and “American notions of whiteness.” That dogma, according to Metzl, equates Obamacare with intrusive government and intrusive government with

threats posed by Mexicans and “welfare queens.” Metzl calculates that “Tennessee's refusal to expand Medicaid cost every single white resident of the state 14.1 days of life,” presumably on average.

Metzl also examines the health consequences of Missouri's 2016 “constitutional carry” bill, a piece of legislation that dramatically widened an individual's right to bear arms in that state. He reports on conversations he had with members of a support group for people who have lost a loved one to suicide. Kim's father committed suicide with a gun after “he got worried about protection, security, you know, and terrorism and intruders.” For Metzl, “terrorism and intruders” translates into fears associated with immigrants and the country's first African American president. His nonwhite interviewees, less fearful of the unknown, are less attached to their rights to own and carry firearms. Kim joins all the others in her suicide support group in rejecting proposals to strengthen gun control, even given the near certainty that someone attempting suicide with a gun—statistically most likely to be a white man—will succeed. “It's not the gun's fault,” says one of the group's members. “Guns are important to us and to our liberties.”

But Metzl cannot come up with concrete means of saving white people's lives within the logic of whiteness. His main advice is that white people should be less fearful of social change; they should understand that it is not a zero-sum game.

## **NO WAY OUT?**

Racial identity, these three authors realize, is a gut-level belief that's very hard to shake. U.S. history has shown the difficulty of getting masses of white

people to further their economic self-interest by banding together with nonwhites—which might explain why all three balk at advocating fundamental political change, at least in the short run.

All three of these books portray white identity politics as conservative and Republican, as if being white-identified leads in only one direction politically. Although they evince varying degrees of sympathy for such politics, all three concur that they are harming American society. Even though Kaufmann and Jardina see white identity politics as a normal response to perceived threats, they also see a need to pull back from a reactionary trend. Kaufmann says white people need “reassurance,” which will open the way “for a return to more relaxed, harmonious and trusting societies,” as when white people sat securely on top. Jardina is more fearful, seeing aggrieved whites as an “untapped well . . . ready to be stoked by politicians willing to go down a potentially very dark path.” Although she believes that an enlargement of whiteness (along the lines of Kaufmann’s white shift) will most likely occur, she sees it as insufficient. Like Metzl, she wishes white identifiers would become less fearful of social change. But she doesn’t suggest any particular means of encouraging that outcome. For his part, Metzl concludes with a plea for what he terms “white humility” and asks, “What might American politics look like if white humility was seen not as a sellout or a capitulation but as an honest effort to address seemingly intractable social issues?” If only white Americans would attempt cooperation rather than domination, American society might move away from “a biology of demise.”

It is true that vast numbers of white-identified people are unhappy with their loss of privileges. But those privileges depended on distortions of Western democratic values that produced a kind of hereditary aristocracy of whiteness. The question before Americans at this time concerns the value they place on their democracy when one of the country’s two main political parties has embraced antidemocratic leadership and policies. Democracy will suffer as long as the Republican Party continues to function as a white people’s party, as it increasingly does. The presidential election of 2016 offered some hope for the future, as some three million more voters opposed Trump than supported him. Now, three years later, the choice between Trump’s white nationalism and the multiculturalism of the Democrats appears even starker. One can only hope that increasing numbers of Americans will conclude that standing at the top of a racial hierarchy is not worth the loss of American democracy. 🌐

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# The Virtue of Monopoly

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## Why the Stock Market Stopped Working

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*Felix Salmon*

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*Darkness by Design: The Hidden Power in Global Capital Markets*

BY WALTER MATTLI. Princeton University Press, 2019, 264 pp.

**Y**ou've heard the story many times. The stock market is rigged. A highly secretive group of opaque financial institutions is making billions of dollars from socially useless high-frequency trading—placing and withdrawing stock orders hundreds of thousands of times per second—with all those profits coming, in one way or another, from the rest of us. The biggest losers of all? Small, mom-and-pop, or retail, investors, who cannot hope to compete.

Perhaps the best-known proponent of this narrative is the author and financial journalist Michael Lewis. In his 2014 book, *Flash Boys*, Lewis painted the stock market as a battle in which the good guys were losing to the bad guys. The book sold well and even instigated a handful of criminal investigations into high-frequency traders

(HFTs), none of which bore any visible fruit. For the truth is that even with the rise of high-frequency trading since the early years of this century, actual mom-and-pop investors have never had it so good. Armed with online accounts offering trades for minuscule fees, they see their transactions go through instantaneously, without the sorts of delays that can allow the market to move against them before their order is filled. If the stock market is broken, it's not broken in a way that is obvious to retail investors.

Yet Lewis was right to worry about HFTs; he just misidentified their main victims. This is the revelation at the heart of Walter Mattli's masterful *Darkness by Design*. Great books make you reexamine your assumptions, and this one delivers in spades. It not only offers a compelling critique of how the stock market has evolved over the past 15 years; it also forces readers to reconsider the idea that competition is good and monopolies are bad. What has truly tilted the playing field in favor of a handful of financial behemoths and HFTs, Mattli argues, is the growing fragmentation of stock markets, a process actively encouraged by misguided government regulators. The biggest losers of that development are not retail investors, who tend to be fairly well-off, but pension funds, insurance companies, and other major institutional investors.

Those financial behemoths are, in fact, the proverbial little guy. One of the paradoxes of financial terminology is that terms such as "retail investor" and "small business owner" connote the relatively impecunious, whereas in fact those investors and owners are disproportionately likely to be in the top one percent of the wealth distribution. The

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**FELIX SALMON** is Chief Financial Correspondent for Axios.

big investors—pension funds, insurance companies, mutual funds, and exchange-traded funds—are much more likely to be holding the wealth of the 99 percent. Ordinary investors are being ripped off every day; they just don't see it, because it is happening behind the scenes of their life insurance policies and their index-fund investments.

### A FATEFUL BATHROOM BREAK

Mattli is a political scientist, and his great insight is to consider the stock market more as a political entity than an economic one. To Mattli, markets are first and foremost “political institutions governed by power relations.” Different members have differing

preferences when it comes to market structure and rules. When those members have similar amounts of power, the result is often a democratic compromise in which the greater good prevails. But when financial institutions garner for themselves an outsize degree of power and influence, they can end up skewing the market structure in their favor, at the expense of ideals such as liquidity and trustworthiness. That, in a nutshell, is what has happened in the global stock market—with the largest banks and brokerage companies refashioning markets to serve their own ends.

Mattli's book is the result of years of research into the history of the New York Stock Exchange and its member

companies. Granular detail about market regulation might not sound like the stuff of a great read. But Mattli spent a lot of time in the NYSE's archives and interviewed many of its former employees and traders. As a result, *Darkness by Design* has an uncommon richness to it.

Take a story that neatly illuminates how much has changed for the worse under today's regulatory regime. Bob Seijas, a 33-year employee of the NYSE, told Mattli about a coworker who in the 1980s was fined \$50,000 (well above



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\$100,000 in today's dollars) because he left his post to go to the men's room for eight minutes and gave inadequate instructions to his assistant. The man in question worked as a specialist—an employee at the exchange who serves as an intermediary between buyers and sellers. Part of his job was to buy into selling pressure—buying stocks even as their prices were falling so as to ensure smoothly continuous trading. But when the specialist went to the bathroom, his assistant didn't keep buying, and the price of the stock he was charged with overseeing fell sharply, by 75 cents. Seijas later defended the specialist, saying that the man had spent four hours performing superbly before taking a bathroom break. A colleague simply retorted, "Don't tell me he stopped at 20 red lights and only passed one."

Indeed, the specialist himself likely expected a penalty and understood that if negligence went unpunished, the consequences for his chosen vocation would be much worse than a one-off \$50,000 hit. From the 1980s all the way to the early years of this century, any such breach of protocol was almost certain to be punished, reinforcing the trust that all participants had in the market.

Specialists played a central role in maintaining that trust. They understood trading patterns, knew who the big buyers and sellers were, and knew how best to match the two without affecting prices. They made money, but they did so transparently, surrounded by traders who watched their every move. Attempts to front-run the market—buying or selling ahead of a client's pending order to pad one's own profits at the expense of the client—were almost always detected. The result was a

market in which, as Mattli writes, almost everybody was "socialized into the value system of the Exchange" and had strong financial and reputational incentives to live up to those values.

### **WHEN BAD GOVERNANCE PAYS**

Those days are over. When the NYSE was a monopoly, before 2005, a single rogue specialist could destroy the reputation of the entire franchise, and so the exchange was always working to improve its governance standards. But the NYSE is no longer the only game in town. Today, there are 23 different registered "national securities exchanges" in the United States, of which the NYSE is merely the second largest, accounting for about 12 percent of the total U.S. market. It competes directly with exchanges bearing names such as MIAX, Cboe BYX, and Nasdaq MRX (not to be confused with Nasdaq BX, Nasdaq GEMX, Nasdaq ISE, or Nasdaq PHLX—none of which is the main Nasdaq exchange that ordinary investors know about). And because it has to compete, the NYSE has gone from a powerful norm setter and regulator in its own right to just another market participant, trying to bolster its position at any cost. Today, stock prices move up or down by 75 cents almost every minute of every day, and the NYSE has neither the ability nor the inclination to stop that from happening.

"In the new era of fragmented markets," Mattli writes, "costly investments in good governance and commitments to fairness, equality, and transparency have to be balanced against an overriding new mandate to attract liquidity to survive." Exchanges do everything they can to attract the business of the major

players, who do millions of trades per second, often accommodating them in ways that benefit those players at the expense of other participants in the market. Although no playing field is entirely level, today the market is much more tilted toward a handful of ultra-sophisticated traders than it ever was during the days of the NYSE's monopoly.

The state bodies monitoring the exchanges suffer from the same lack of cohesion, with predictable results: when an economic sector is governed by multiple regulators, actors will constantly engage in regulatory arbitrage, rewarding the most lenient regulators while diverting their activities away from the most stringent. Before the 2008 financial crisis, for instance, two U.S. bank regulators—the Office of Thrift Supervision and the Office of the Comptroller of the Currency—competed with each other to attract banks, which could choose which agency's regulation to submit to. That never made much sense, and lawmakers merged the two as part of the 2010 Dodd-Frank Wall Street Reform and Consumer Protection Act. But to this day, the Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC) and the Commodity Futures Trading Commission (CFTC) compete with each other to regulate markets. (Blame congressional politics: the CFTC is governed by the House and Senate Agriculture Committees, whereas the SEC is governed by the House Financial Services Committee and the Senate Banking Committee.)

In earlier days, the concentration of market power at the NYSE made up for this regulatory confusion. When it came to stock trading, the exchange proved a much more capable regulator than the

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SEC or any other federal agency ever did. The NYSE enforcement arm had deep institutional knowledge. It knew, for instance, that if a broker placed a trade in IBM stock at 12:04:45 PM, he would need at least 22 seconds to walk over to a different specialist to place a different trade. The NYSE used this kind of information to conduct forensic examinations of suspicious transactions, examinations that the SEC would find completely impossible to perform.

Today, however, the regulators are on their own; the individual exchanges have all but abdicated even the pretense of having a governance structure with any teeth. And as Mattli points out, “The creation of exploitative schemes by particularly powerful actors to benefit themselves is rational in a system of bad governance because the chances of getting caught are tiny and the reputational or material consequences of such behavior are largely insignificant while the profits from such schemes are high.”

## **THE END OF AN EMPIRE**

What caused this enormous change? The short answer is the Regulation National Market System, or Reg NMS, a rule promulgated in 2005 by the SEC in the name of market efficiency. It ostensibly modernized markets by moving stock trading away from the NYSE and toward numerous other exchanges, but it also marked the death of the old NYSE. Up until that point, the exchange was a mutual society: firms could buy seats, and the exchange was owned by its members. After 2005, it demutualized, stopped selling seats, and became just one among many exchanges, most of which were owned and operated by enormous global broker-dealers—think

Credit Suisse, Goldman Sachs, and Merrill Lynch—that had spent limitless hours and dollars on lobbying the SEC to push Reg NMS through. Rather than being a utility owned by its members, the NYSE was now a profit-maximizing entity like all the other exchanges.

On top of there being competition among the many new exchanges, every major broker-dealer also engages in “internalization”—effectively acting as its own mini-exchange and fulfilling orders with its own inventory of shares rather than sending them on to any exchange at all. Not so long ago, if you phoned up a broker and placed an order to buy 100 shares of IBM, that order would likely be filled on the NYSE. Today, HFTs compete with one another to pay your broker for the privilege of taking the other side of your trade. This fragmentation benefits HFTs, who are constantly searching for order flows that they can keep for themselves rather than having to compete for them on an open market. It also helps the major global securities firms that orchestrated the end of the NYSE monopoly in the first place, since they are paid for—or take direct advantage of—the retail order flow that they generate. Between them, these huge companies now have a market share north of 70 percent.

The big test of any stock market is whether it has depth: whether it’s possible to buy or sell a large number of shares in a small amount of time without moving the market. Traders will naturally flock to such a market, creating even more depth—a virtuous cycle that results in monopolies, such as the one the NYSE enjoyed until 2005. The NYSE’s monopoly, in turn, allowed it to be technically innovative, introducing everything from

the first stock ticker (1867) and the first trading-floor telephones (1878) to a system capable of processing four billion shares a day (1999). No other stock exchange in the world could come close.

Today's internalization, by contrast, has created a classic tragedy of the commons: big banks free-ride on the NYSE's ticker, trading at the prices it publishes in real time, without contributing to its liquidity. The consequences became clear during the "flash crash" of May 2010, when billions of dollars of value suddenly evaporated, only to reappear minutes later. Without the deep liquidity and oversight of the old NYSE there was no one to prevent thousands of stocks from collectively plunging and then rebounding. Worse still, that kind of event happens every day in individual stocks; the only unusual thing about the flash crash was that it took place in many stocks simultaneously.

As the flash crash proved, today's market lacks depth. Large investors want to move billions of dollars in and out of the stock market but cannot do so without prices moving against them, their orders being front-run by HFTs. The HFTs who benefit from this system are the embodiment of what Adair Turner, then chair of the United Kingdom's Financial Services Authority, famously characterized as "socially useless" financial activity. They reinvest their profits into machines that can trade in microseconds rather than milliseconds; those profits would surely serve a higher purpose if they were invested in other parts of the economy. And as these outfits become bigger and more sophisticated, they trade increasingly complex financial products—all invented by banks—across dozens of

markets and jurisdictions. No regulator can hope to keep up, so these highly secretive companies effectively operate with no code, no morals, and no values. Their only motivation is profit.

Investors once hoped that so-called dark pools would offer a way out of the depth problem. Dark pools exploded in popularity after 2005, since large institutions could no longer count on the NYSE's specialists to provide ample liquidity and found themselves being outpaced by HFTs on smaller exchanges. Because orders placed in dark pools are not visible to other traders until they have been executed, the hope was that HFTs would not be able to make money front-running these transactions. In reality, however, even dark pools are infested with HFTs, whose trade volume the pools rely on to remain profitable.

### **HIGH-FREQUENCY MANIPULATORS**

The HFTs are in control of the markets now. They are the must-have customers for any exchange, because they drive most of the volume and liquidity in the market. The exchanges, many of them created to serve the HFTs, cannot themselves prevent the latter's dominance. Nor can regulators, who are confined to single markets in single countries, whereas HFTs roam globally. By the time a regulator has found a vaguely suspicious transaction, the algorithms HFTs use have long since moved on to something new.

Even when blatantly illegal activity happens right under their noses, regulators generally ignore it. From 2006 to 2010, the NYSE gave HFTs a physical trading-speed advantage by openly allowing them to place their trading computers right inside the exchange.



This practice was, as Mattli notes, a patent violation of securities law. But instead of punishing the NYSE, the regulators simply waited for the exchange to ask permission, which eventually it did. Then the SEC granted that permission. Other cases involve special order types, or SOTs—extremely arcane forms of placing a trade, designed to give HFTs an extra advantage over real-money investors. On rare occasions, the SEC has levied fines on exchanges for implementing SOTs without permission, but the fines are tiny compared with the profits the SOTs generate.

Mattli has a whole chapter on various forms of market manipulation that are unequivocally harmful but ubiquitous. There are the ways that banks have allowed HFTs into dark pools even after promising large investors that they would not, for instance. There is quote stuffing—placing millions of essentially fake orders for stocks, at prices far enough removed from the market price that the orders won't ever be filled—which makes it impossible to see how much liquidity there is in any given security. That happens 125 times per day, on average, across 75 percent of all U.S.-listed equities. And there is spoofing—investors placing and then immediately withdrawing orders near the market price that they never actually intended to see through—which also happens every day in every major stock.

The nefarious activity is clear to all, as is the lack of any real enforcement. The regulators are not only captured by the big banks; they are also completely out of their depth technologically. By some counts, the Financial Industry Regulatory Authority, a private regulator overseen by the SEC, monitors 50 billion

market events per day. Its computers flag about one percent of those—500 million events per day—and a single flag can create weeks of work for a team of regulatory investigators. The vast majority of suspicious transactions likely go uninvestigated.

A couple of glimmers of hope remain. The European Union has made decent strides in improving investor protections with a 2018 directive called MiFID II, a new version of the Markets in Financial Instruments Directive, which forces exchanges to be much more transparent about conflicts of interest in their disclosures to investors. In 2012, France implemented a 0.1 percent tax on the value of canceled or modified orders, which is a strong disincentive to engage in quote stuffing or spoofing. And there are even occasional discussions, so far confined largely to academia, about moving to so-called discontinuous markets, where stocks would be allowed to trade a mere ten times per second—slow enough that HFTs could not front-run orders.

Ironically, the greatest hope of all may be that the technological arms race between HFTs and exchanges will become so astronomically expensive that it will force the world's biggest exchanges into megamergers with one another, resulting in a new global monopoly spanning countries and markets. The idea of a single trading venue for stocks, bonds, currencies, and derivatives, operating 24 hours a day, oblivious not only to regulators but also to time zones, admittedly sounds terrifyingly dystopian. But the lesson of Mattli's book is that sometimes giants can be relatively benign. It is when they break apart that chaos results. 🌪

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# The New Masters of the Universe

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## Big Tech and the Business of Surveillance

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Paul Starr

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*The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight for a Human Future at the New Frontier of Power*

BY SHOSHANA ZUBOFF.  
PublicAffairs, 2019, 704 pp.

In his 1944 classic, *The Great Transformation*, the economic historian Karl Polanyi told the story of modern capitalism as a “double movement” that led to both the expansion of the market and its restriction. During the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, old feudal restraints on commerce were abolished, and land, labor, and money came to be treated as commodities. But unrestrained capitalism ravaged the environment, damaged public health, and led to economic panics and depressions, and by the time Polanyi was writing, societies had reintroduced limits on the market.

Shoshana Zuboff, a professor emerita at the Harvard Business School, sees a new version of the first half of Polanyi’s double movement at work today with the rise of “surveillance capitalism,” a

new market form pioneered by Facebook and Google. In *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism*, she argues that capitalism is once again extending the sphere of the market, this time by claiming “human experience as free raw material for hidden commercial practices of extraction, prediction, and sales.” With the rise of “ubiquitous computing” (the spread of computers into all realms of life) and the Internet of Things (the connection of everyday objects to the Internet), the extraction of data has become pervasive. We live in a world increasingly populated with networked devices that capture our communications, movements, behavior, and relationships, even our emotions and states of mind. And, Zuboff warns, surveillance capitalism has thus far escaped the sort of countermovement described by Polanyi.

Zuboff’s book is a brilliant, arresting analysis of the digital economy and a plea for a social awakening about the enormity of the changes that technology is imposing on political and social life. Most Americans see the threats posed by technology companies as matters of privacy. But Zuboff shows that surveillance capitalism involves more than the accumulation of personal data on an unprecedented scale. The technology firms and their experts—whom Zuboff labels “the new priesthood”—are creating new forms of power and means of behavioral modification that operate outside individual awareness and public accountability. Checking this priesthood’s power will require a new countermovement—one that restrains surveillance capitalism in the name of personal freedom and democracy.

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**PAUL STARR** is Professor of Sociology and Public Affairs at Princeton University and the author of *Entrenchment: Wealth, Power, and the Constitution of Democratic Societies*.

## THE RISE OF THE MACHINES

A reaction against the power of the technology industry is already underway. The U.S. Justice Department and the Federal Trade Commission are conducting antitrust investigations of Amazon, Apple, Facebook, and Google. In July, the FTC levied a \$5 billion fine on Facebook for violating promises to consumers that the company made in its own privacy policies (the United States, unlike the European Union, has no general law protecting online privacy). Congress is considering legislation to limit technology companies' use of data and roll back the broad immunity from liability for user-generated content that it granted them in the Communications Decency Act of 1996. This national debate, still uncertain in its ultimate impact, makes Zuboff's book all the more timely and relevant.

The rise of surveillance capitalism also has an international dimension. U.S. companies have long dominated the technology industry and the Internet, arousing suspicion and opposition in other countries. Now, chastened by the experience of Russian interference in the 2016 U.S. presidential election, Americans are getting nervous about stores of personal data falling into the hands of hostile foreign powers. In July

of this year, there was a viral panic about FaceApp, a mobile application for editing pictures of faces that millions of Americans had downloaded to see projected images of themselves at older ages. Created by a Russian firm, the app was rumored to be used by Russian intelligence to gather facial recognition data, perhaps to create deepfake videos—rumors that the firm has denied. Early last year, a Chinese company's acquisition of the gay dating app Grindr stirred concern about the potential use of the app's data to compromise individuals and U.S. national security; the federal Committee on Foreign Investment in the United States has since ordered the Chinese firm to avoid accessing Grindr's

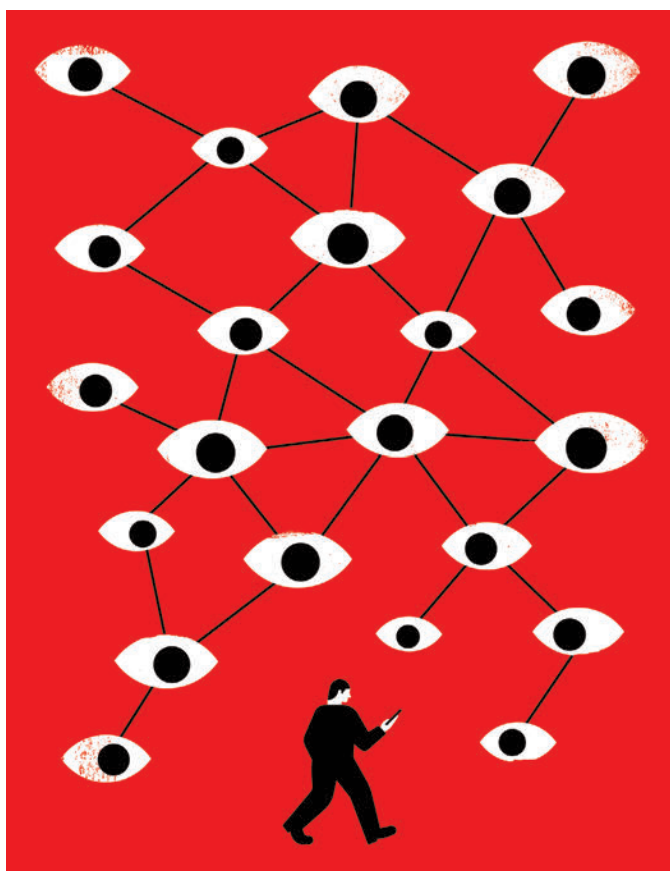


ILLUSTRATION BY THE PROJECT TWINS

data and divest itself entirely of Grindr by June 2020. It is not hard to imagine how the rivalry between the United States and China could lead not only to a technology divorce but also to two different worlds of everyday surveillance.

According to Zuboff, surveillance capitalism originated with the brilliant discoveries and brazen claims of one American firm. “Google,” she writes, “is to surveillance capitalism what the Ford Motor Company and General Motors were to mass-production-based managerial capitalism.” Incorporated in 1998, Google soon came to dominate Internet search. But initially, it did not focus on advertising and had no clear path to profitability. What it did have was a groundbreaking insight: the collateral data it derived from searches—the numbers and patterns of queries, their phrasing, people’s click patterns, and so on—could be used to improve Google’s search results and add new services for users. This would attract more users, which would in turn further improve its search engine in a recursive cycle of learning and expansion.

Google’s commercial breakthrough came in 2002, when it saw that it could also use the collateral data it collected to profile the users themselves according to their characteristics and interests. Then, instead of matching ads with search queries, the company could match ads with individual users. Targeting ads precisely and efficiently to individuals is the Holy Grail of advertising. Rather than being Google’s customers, Zuboff argues, the users became its raw-material suppliers, from whom the firm derived what she calls “behavioral surplus.” That surplus consists of the data above and beyond what Google needs to

improve user services. Together with the company’s formidable capabilities in artificial intelligence, Google’s enormous flows of data enabled it to create what Zuboff sees as the true basis of the surveillance industry—“prediction products,” which anticipate what users will do “now, soon, and later.” Predicting what people will buy is the key to advertising, but behavioral predictions have obvious value for other purposes, as well, such as insurance, hiring decisions, and political campaigns.

Zuboff’s analysis helps make sense of the seemingly unrelated services offered by Google, its diverse ventures and many acquisitions. Gmail, Google Maps, the Android operating system, YouTube, Google Home, even self-driving cars—these and dozens of other services are all ways, Zuboff argues, of expanding the company’s “supply routes” for user data both on- and offline. Asking for permission to obtain those data has not been part of the company’s operating style. For instance, when the company was developing Street View, a feature of its mapping service that displays photographs of different locations, it went ahead and recorded images of streets and homes in different countries without first asking for local permission, fighting off opposition as it arose. In the surveillance business, any undefended area of social life is fair game.

This pattern of expansion reflects an underlying logic of the industry: in the competition for artificial intelligence and surveillance revenues, the advantage goes to the firms that can acquire both vast and varied streams of data. The other companies engaged in surveillance capitalism at the highest level—Amazon,



Facebook, Microsoft, and the big telecommunications companies—also face the same expansionary imperatives. Step by step, the industry has expanded both the scope of surveillance (by migrating from the virtual into the real world) and the depth of surveillance (by plumbing the interiors of individuals' lives and accumulating data on their personalities, moods, and emotions).

The surveillance industry has not faced much resistance because users like its personalized information and free products. Indeed, they like them so much that they readily agree to onerous, one-sided terms of service. When the FaceApp controversy blew up, many people who had used the app were surprised to learn that they had agreed to give the company “a perpetual, irrevocable, nonexclusive, royalty-free, worldwide, fully-paid, transferable sub-licensable license to use, reproduce, modify, adapt, publish, translate, create derivative works from, distribute, publicly perform and display your User Content and any name, username or likeness provided in connection with your User Content in all media formats and channels now known or later developed, without compensation to you.” But this wasn't some devious Russian formulation. As *Wired* pointed out, Facebook has just as onerous terms of service.

Even if Congress enacts legislation barring companies from imposing such extreme terms, it is unlikely to resolve the problems Zuboff raises. Most people are probably willing to accept the use of data to personalize their services and display advertising predicted to be of interest to them, and Congress is unlikely to stop that. The same

processes of personalization, however, can be used to modify behavior and beliefs. This is the core concern of Zuboff's book: the creation of a largely covert system of power and domination.

### MAKE THEM DANCE

From extracting data and making predictions, the technology firms have gone on to intervening in the real world. After all, what better way to improve predictions than to guide how people act? The industry term for shaping behavior is “actuation.” In pursuit of actuation, Zuboff writes, the technology firms “nudge, tune, herd, manipulate, and modify behavior in specific directions by executing actions as subtle as inserting a specific phrase into your Facebook news feed, timing the appearance of a BUY button on your phone, or shutting down your car engine when an insurance payment is late.”

Evidence of the industry's capacity to modify behavior on a mass scale comes from two studies conducted by Facebook. During the 2010 U.S. congressional elections, the company's researchers ran a randomized, controlled experiment on 61 million users. Users were split up into three groups. Two groups were shown information about voting (such as the location of polling places) at the top of their Facebook news feeds; users in one of these groups also received a social message containing up to six pictures of Facebook friends who had already voted. The third group received no special voting information. The intervention had a significant effect on those who received the social message: the researchers estimated that the experiment led to 340,000 additional votes being cast. In a

second experiment, Facebook researchers tailored the emotional content of users' news feeds, in some cases reducing the number of friends' posts expressing positive emotions and in other cases reducing their negative posts. They found that those who viewed more negative posts in their news feeds went on to make more negative posts themselves, demonstrating, as the title of the published article about the study put it, "massive-scale emotional contagion through social networks."

The 2016 Brexit and U.S. elections provided real-world examples of covert disinformation delivered via Facebook. Not only had the company previously allowed the political consulting firm Cambridge Analytica to harvest personal data on tens of millions of Facebook users; during the 2016 U.S. election, it also permitted microtargeting of "unpublished page post ads," generally known as "dark posts," which were invisible to the public at large. These were delivered to users as part of their news feeds along with regular content, and when users liked, commented on, or shared them, their friends saw the same ads, now personally endorsed. But the dark posts then disappeared and were never publicly archived. Microtargeting of ads is not inherently illegitimate, but journalists are unable to police deception and political opponents cannot rebut attacks when social media deliver such messages outside the public sphere. The delivery of covert disinformation on a mass basis is fundamentally inimical to democratic debate.

Facebook has since eliminated dark posts and made other changes in response to public criticism, but Zuboff is still right about this central point:

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“Facebook owns an unprecedented means of behavior modification that operates covertly, at scale, and in the absence of social or legal mechanisms of agreement, contest, and control.” No law, for example, bars Facebook from adjusting its users’ news feeds to favor one political party or another (and in the United States, such a law might well be held unconstitutional). As a 2018 study by *The Wall Street Journal* showed, YouTube’s recommendation algorithm was feeding viewers videos from ever more extreme fringe groups. That algorithm and others represent an enormous source of power over beliefs and behavior.

Surveillance capitalism, according to Zuboff, is moving society in a fundamentally antidemocratic direction. With the advent of ubiquitous computing, the industry dreams of creating transportation systems and whole cities with built-in mechanisms for controlling behavior. Using sensors, cameras, and location data, Sidewalk Labs, a subsidiary of Google’s parent company, Alphabet, envisions a “for-profit city” with the means of enforcing city regulations and with dynamic online markets for city services. The system would require people to use Sidewalk’s mobile payment system and allow the firm, as its CEO, Dan Doctoroff, explained in a 2016 talk, to “target ads to people in proximity, and then obviously over time track them through things like beacons and location services as well as their browsing activity.” One software developer for an Internet of Things company told Zuboff, “We are learning how to write the music, and then we let the music make them dance.”

Such aspirations imply a radical inequality of power between the people who control the play list and the people who dance to it. In the last third of her book, Zuboff takes her analysis up a level, identifying the theoretical ideas and general model of society that she sees as implicit in surveillance capitalism. The animating idea behind surveillance capitalism, Zuboff says, is that of the psychologist B. F. Skinner, who regarded the belief in human freedom as an illusion standing in the way of a more harmonious, controlled world. Now, in Zuboff’s view, the technology industry is developing the means of behavior modification to carry out Skinner’s program.

The emerging system of domination, Zuboff cautions, is not totalitarian; it has no need for violence and no interest in ideological conformity. Instead, it is what she calls “instrumentarian”—it uses everyday surveillance and actuation to channel people in directions preferred by those in control. As an example, she describes China’s efforts to introduce a social credit system that scores individuals by their behavior, their friends, and other aspects of their lives and then uses this score to determine each individual’s access to services and privileges. The Chinese system fuses instrumentarian power and the state (and it is interested in political conformity), but its emerging American counterpart may fuse instrumentarian power and the market.

## NO FUTURE?

*The Age of Surveillance Capitalism* is a powerful and passionate book, the product of a deep immersion in both technology and business that is also informed by an understanding of

history and a commitment to human freedom. Zuboff seems, however, unable to resist the most dire, over-the-top formulations of her argument. She writes, for example, that the industry has gone “from automating information flows about you to automating you.” An instrumentarian system of behavior modification, she says, is not just a possibility but an inevitability, driven by surveillance capitalism’s own internal logic: “Just as industrial capitalism was driven to the continuous intensification of the means of production, so surveillance capitalists are . . . now locked in a cycle of continuous intensification of the means of behavioral modification.”

As a warning, Zuboff’s argument deserves to be heard, but Americans are far from mere puppets in the hands of Silicon Valley. The puzzle here is that Zuboff rejects a rhetoric of “inevitabilism”—“the dictatorship of no alternatives”—but her book gives little basis for thinking we can avoid the new technologies of control, and she has little to say about specific alternatives herself. Prophecy you will find here; policy, not so much. She rightly argues that breaking up the big technology companies would not resolve the problems she raises, although antitrust action may well be justified for other reasons. Some reformers have suggested creating an entirely new regulatory structure to deal with the power of digital platforms and improve “algorithmic accountability”—that is, identifying and remedying the harms from algorithms. But all of that lies outside this book.

The more power major technology platforms exercise over politics and society, the more opposition they will

provoke—not only in the United States but also around the world. The global reach of American surveillance capitalism may be only a temporary phase. Nationalism is on the march today, and the technology industry is in its path: countries that want to chart their own destiny will not continue to allow U.S. companies to control their platforms for communication and politics.

The competition of rival firms and political systems may also complicate any efforts to reform the technology industry in the United States. Would it be a good thing, for example, to heavily regulate major U.S. technology firms if their Chinese rivals gained as a result? The U.S. companies at least profess liberal democratic values. The trick is passing laws to hold them to these values. If Zuboff’s book helps awaken a countermovement to achieve that result, we may yet be able to avoid the dark future she sees being born today. 🌐



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## Recent Books

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### Political and Legal

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*G. John Ikenberry*

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*What Was Liberalism? The Past, Present, and Promise of a Noble Idea*

BY JAMES TRAUB. Basic Books, 2019, 320 pp.

As liberals grapple with rising populism and authoritarianism, Traub turns to history and theory to reclaim liberalism's principles. His book mounts one of the best efforts of this kind yet, tracing liberalism's core ideas from the age of democratic revolutions to the grand ideological struggles of the twentieth century to the convulsions of the current vexed moment. Traub shows that liberalism is an amalgam of often conflicting ideas: classical republican principles, Lockean individualism, the commitment to popular sovereignty, and evolving notions of rights and progressive social ideals. Various settings and figures populate the narrative, but Traub sees John Stuart Mill as the pivotal thinker linking the classical and modern strains

of liberalism. Mill insisted that political institutions had to manage the tradeoffs between liberty and equality and foster the social conditions for individuals to flourish. In the United States, the reformist ideas of Theodore Roosevelt, Woodrow Wilson, and other progressives in the early twentieth century brought these impulses into the industrial age, but only through President Franklin Roosevelt and the New Deal did modern liberalism find a way to bridge a Jeffersonian appeal to citizenship and a Hamiltonian commitment to an activist state. Traub argues that liberalism lost its way in the 1990s, aligning itself with globalization and losing its deeper commitment to a progressive vision of nationalism and the common man.

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*Empire of Democracy: The Remaking of the West Since the Cold War, 1971–2017*

BY SIMON REID-HENRY. Simon & Schuster, 2019, 880 pp.

In this massive, kaleidoscopic history of the current democratic age, Reid-Henry finds the roots of the crisis of modern liberal democracy in the early 1970s. He argues that a series of small changes in economic, social, and political life across the Western world conspired to erode the consensus-oriented model of

WALTER RUSSELL MEAD has retired as reviewer of the section on the United States, and we thank him for his outstanding contributions. We are fortunate to have as his successor JESSICA T. MATHEWS, a distinguished fellow at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. From 1997 to 2015, she served as Carnegie's president. Prior to that, she was director of the Council on Foreign Relations' Washington Program and a senior fellow at CFR. Earlier in her career, she served as deputy to the U.S. undersecretary of state for global affairs during the Clinton administration and as director of the Office of Global Issues at the National Security Council during the Carter administration.

democracy that had emerged after World War II. The Bretton Woods regime collapsed, triggering shifts in how governments cooperated and managed their economies. The OPEC oil shocks ushered in stagflation and an end to the early postwar commitments to full employment. New forms of identity politics followed the cultural upheavals of the 1960s. Crucially, centrist forces and institutions across the Western system began to break up in this era as the old compromises between labor and capital frayed. In the battle of ideas, the postwar Keynesian consensus gave way to conservative theories about monetarism and the deregulation of markets. Many of these stories are familiar, but Reid-Henry is particularly good at revealing the subtle social and cultural transformations that unfolded in dozens of countries, including some often overlooked places.

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*Rethinking Global Governance*

BY THOMAS G. WEISS AND RORDEN WILKINSON. Polity, 2019, 160 pp.

Coined in the 1990s, the term “global governance” tried to capture the multifaceted ways in which governments, companies, transnational groups, and international organizations worked in concert in a time of growing interdependence. Today, talk of global governance is out of fashion. Many people hear the phrase and think it is some sort of elite form of “globalism.” This short, pithy book makes the case for a new scholarly focus on international cooperation. Weiss and Wilkinson argue that although resurgent populism and nationalism have prompted attacks on

globalization, the fact remains that the world is more intensely interconnected than ever before. From financial markets to refugee flows to production networks, there is no escaping the ways in which modern societies are vulnerable to one another. Weiss and Wilkinson argue that scholars must urgently make the case that international cooperation strengthens rather than weakens people’s ability to take control of and improve their own lives.

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*This Is Not Propaganda: Adventures in the War Against Reality*

BY PETER POMERANTSEV.  
PublicAffairs, 2019, 256 pp.

Combining personal memoir with investigative reporting, Pomerantsev shares vivid and chilling reports from the frontlines of the disinformation wars. He explores the worlds of hackers, trolls, and purveyors of fake news, making stops in the Philippines, Russia, Serbia, Turkey, Ukraine, and a number of countries in Latin America. The dark arts are evolving as authoritarian regimes learn to speak in the vernacular of the digital age, spreading fake news through social media, talk shows, and reality TV shows. “Digital vigilantes” employed by hostile governments flood Western societies with conspiracy theories and “alternative facts” to sow confusion and erode faith in democratic institutions. Through many anecdotes and colorful stories, Pomerantsev tells a depressing morality tale of the age: it was thought that technology and information would strengthen democratic, liberal, and open societies; make public debate more informed; and generate cooperation across borders—but the

opposite has happened. Information is now weaponized, and one country can come close to destroying another “almost without touching it.”

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*Enduring Alliance: A History of NATO and the Postwar Global Order*

BY TIMOTHY ANDREWS SAYLE.

Cornell University Press, 2019, 360 pp.

Why is NATO the longest-lasting alliance of the modern era? Scholars have typically pointed to the shared democratic values of its members, which many believe forge a unique bond. In his carefully researched history, Sayle inverts this conventional understanding. In NATO's early decades, government elites maintained the pact as a buffer against the whims of fickle democratic electorates that might too quickly succumb to Soviet peace overtures and undermine the balance of power in the Cold War. Drawing on extensive archival records, Sayle rehearses in detail the founding of NATO and its early operations, highlighting the importance of intergovernmental elites—ministers, diplomats, commanders—working outside public view to manage and protect the alliance's integrity. NATO's resiliency is rooted in the day-to-day efforts of this multinational corps of officials, dedicated to keeping the alliance afloat. What is NATO's future? Sayle argues that the underlying rationale for the alliance still holds, although updated slightly for today: keeping the Russians out, the Americans in, and the Europeans together.

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## Economic, Social, and Environmental

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*Richard N. Cooper*

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*The Antitrust Paradigm: Restoring a Competitive Economy*

BY JONATHAN B. BAKER. Harvard University Press, 2019, 368 pp.

**B**aker, a former director of the Federal Trade Commission, believes that the U.S. government has gone much too far in relaxing the enforcement of its century-old antitrust laws. He places a substantial measure of blame on the so-called Chicago school of economics, whose free-market theories have wielded substantial influence over agencies entrusted with the enforcement of financial regulations and over the courts, particularly the Supreme Court. The results of lax enforcement include an increased concentration of market share in both new and old industries, the growth of corporate profits as a percentage of total income, and a decline in overall productivity. In Baker's view, contrary to what others claim, these outcomes are not justified by any resulting innovation: indeed, many acquisitions by large firms are intended to suppress upstarts. The book's detailed analysis draws almost entirely on U.S. laws, institutions, and court decisions, albeit with a favorable nod to competition policy in the EU. But Baker's arguments apply to all modern economies, which must establish and maintain competition in order to thrive.

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*The Sex Factor: How Women Made the West Rich*

BY VICTORIA BATEMAN. Polity, 2019, 248 pp.

This provocative book mounts a feminist critique of much modern economic theory and policy, which the author claims has a strong and continuing male bias. Bateman seeks to widen the discipline's focus on marketable goods and services to include other social and personal activities that affect economies. The most striking thesis of the book is that the "rise of the West" during and after the Industrial Revolution—a development that still puzzles many economic historians because Europe had long lagged behind China, India, and the Islamic Middle East—was due to the way women were treated differently in western European societies. Although women are subordinate to men in most societies, women enjoyed relatively greater freedom in western Europe (particularly in Protestant northwestern Europe) than in other parts of the world at the time. Women married later, had fewer children, and were better educated. This greater freedom led to more saving and more productive investment.

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*More From Less: The Surprising Story of How We Learned to Prosper Using Fewer Resources—and What Happens Next*

BY ANDREW McAFEE. Scribner, 2019, 352 pp.

McAfee offers an optimistic outlook for the future of mankind—or at least for those who live in wealthy, democratic countries. This unusual book highlights "four horsemen of the optimist": effective capitalism, technological progress, public

awareness, and effective government. Free markets and advancing technologies provide the basis for material well-being; a free press and strong governance check uncontrolled greed and protect against social and environmental harms. McAfee favors social democracy over socialism, insisting on a sharp distinction between the two. His most surprising finding concerns the U.S. economy. Over the past two decades, the material standard of living of Americans has continued to rise even as Americans consume fewer physical resources, such as water, metals, and building materials. McAfee sees these trends spreading to the rest of the world.

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*Digital Transformation: Survive and Thrive in an Era of Mass Extinction*

BY THOMAS M. SIEBEL.

RosettaBooks, 2019, 256 pp.

The "mass extinction" of the subtitle refers to business firms that fail to digitize their operations. Successful digitization, according to Siebel, involves mastering four key technologies: flexible cloud computing, big data, artificial intelligence, and the Internet of Things. In the public sector, digitization will allow governments to reduce costs and improve services. Siebel details useful case studies of U.S. and European firms that have benefited from digitization, such as John Deere, 3M, and Italy's Enel. He also examines the U.S. Air Force's use of artificial intelligence to anticipate maintenance requirements for airplanes. The book sounds a note of warning in tracing the ambitious pace of digitization in China, which is virtually at war with the United States and other Western countries in developing and exploiting new technologies.



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*American and Chinese Energy Security:  
A Grand Strategic Approach*

BY RYAN OPSAL. Lexington Books,  
2019, 228 pp.

The survival of any country as a functioning society depends on having reliable sources of energy. Preserving access to energy is not simply an economic matter but a question of grand strategy. This informative book focuses on how China and the United States, both large importers of oil, secured their energy supplies between 1992 and 2013. It compares the evolution of both countries' strategies for guaranteeing oil security through shifts in policy and advances in technology. Opsal claims that the United States is well ahead of China in oil security on many fronts, but China is rapidly catching up.

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**Military, Scientific, and  
Technological**

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*Lawrence D. Freedman*

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*The Last Card: Inside George W. Bush's  
Decision to Surge in Iraq*

EDITED BY TIMOTHY ANDREWS  
SAYLE, JEFFREY A. ENGEL, HAL  
BRANDS, AND WILLIAM INBODEN.  
Cornell University Press, 2019, 416 pp.

**I**n early 2007, as U.S. troops struggled to contain a raging civil war in Iraq, President George W. Bush announced a "surge" of five additional brigades to the country. Based on interviews with many of the key participants, including the president, the first part of this book

describes how the decision was made. For Bush, the alternative to the surge was defeat. He met with considerable opposition at high levels of his own administration but skillfully managed the process of winning broad support for his view. The book features some dissenting voices, but most of the interviewees approved of both the handling and the outcome of the surge. Conspicuous in their absence are Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld and General George Casey, commander of U.S. forces in Iraq. They stayed committed to their established strategy even though it was widely judged to be failing. Indeed, the book leaves one wishing that the original decision to invade Iraq had been taken with as much care as the decision to change course. Although repetitive at times, this is a fascinating contribution to the history of the war.

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*The Nuclear Spies: America's Atomic  
Intelligence Operation Against Hitler and  
Stalin*

BY VINCE HOUGHTON. Cornell  
University Press, 2019, 248 pp.

The atom bomb was never a high priority for the Nazis, at least when compared with their development of long-range cruise and ballistic missiles. A major U.S. intelligence operation during World War II confirmed that the German nuclear threat was not as great as had been feared. Specialist teams followed the Allied armies into Italy and Germany, gathering information on the German atomic project but also trying to secure the relevant scientists, materials, and papers before they could fall into Soviet hands. Intriguingly, U.S. intelligence officials also hoped to keep the French

at a distance because of the feared communist sympathies of France's leading nuclear scientists. In this neat, enthralling study, Houghton wonders why this successful intelligence operation was followed by the failure to anticipate the first Soviet nuclear test in August 1949. He points to the incoherence of the U.S. intelligence system after the war and the complacent underestimation of the capacities of a communist government.

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*Power to the People: How Open Technological Innovation Is Arming Tomorrow's Terrorists*

BY AUDREY KURTH CRONIN.  
Oxford University Press, 2019, 440 pp.

Alfred Nobel's invention of dynamite was a boon to major infrastructure projects around the world, but the explosive was also adopted by anarchists determined to blow up heads of state. A young sergeant named Mikhail Kalashnikov figured out how to improve the standard assault rifle used by the Soviet army in World War II. The gun that still bears his name is easy to use, reliable, and durable—and became the weapon of choice for terrorists and militias around the world. In this meticulously researched book, Cronin shows how groups such as the Islamic State (or ISIS) exploit new technologies such as the Internet, smartphones, autonomous vehicles, and artificial intelligence. Cronin hardly wants innovation to stop just because of potentially malign applications. Instead, she argues that governments must develop countermeasures to preempt militants from co-opting innovations to catastrophic effect.

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*Pirates: A New History, From Vikings to Somali Raiders*

BY PETER LEHR. Yale University Press, 2019, 272 pp.

*Marque and Reprisal: The Spheres of Public and Private War*

BY KENNETH B. MOSS. University Press of Kansas, 2019, 464 pp.

In his lively, vivid history of pirates, Lehr finds some striking continuities from ancient to modern times. Although pirates are motivated above all by greed, creed and religion have often influenced their choice of targets. The lure of large rewards from little effort has always attracted the impoverished. Careers tend to be short, as much because of the hazards of the sea as the threat of legal sanction and punishment. Most pirates have preferred to ambush their prey, frightening the crew into surrender and only fighting their way onboard if necessary. The best defense against pirates is having a vessel faster than theirs. Regions plagued by weak governance and local corruption enable piracy. Certain coastlines have long been favorable hunting grounds: in the 1990s, Somali pirates "loitered in the approaches of the Bab el-Mandeb in the Gulf of Aden," just as John "Long Ben" Avery did in the seventeenth century.

There has always been a fine line between piracy and privateering. Queen Elizabeth I declared Sir Francis Drake to be "her" pirate because the rival Spanish suffered the most from his depredations. Moss' account overlaps with Lehr's book in showing how otherwise illegal acts could be sanctioned in the name of the state under letters of marque and reprisal. This thorough and thoughtful history

focuses on the pivotal role of privateers in the struggles for control of the sea and the spread of European empires. Moss highlights the legal and political issues raised by privateering, including the right of privateers to defend themselves, the ownership of the booty they seized, and their relationship to the states that gave them licences. Privateers remain active today, just in different forms. The private sector has expanded to fill in gaps left when all-volunteer armies handle the complex demands of counterinsurgency. Contractors have joined the fighting in Iraq, for instance, often to detrimental effect. Moss brings the book right up to the present with a discussion of the private sector's participation in cyberconflict.

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## The United States

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*Jessica T. Mathews*

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*Presidential Misconduct: From George Washington to Today*

EDITED BY JAMES M. BANNER, JR.  
New Press, 2019, 528 pp.

**I**n 1974, John Doar, special counsel to the House committee handling impeachment proceedings against U.S. President Richard Nixon, decided that the committee's work would benefit from expert analysis that would compare Nixon's wrongdoing to that of past presidents. In an astonishing eight weeks, a team of 15 scholars, recruited and led by the historian C. Vann Woodward, produced a volume of brief, factual reviews of misconduct by every administration from George Washington's through Lyndon

Johnson's, excluding purely private behavior or actions that the authors judged to be merely partisan or ideological. Their work has now been reissued with added reviews of eight more administrations (Nixon's through Barack Obama's). The new volume was spearheaded by Banner, a member of the original team, who describes it as an exercise of "historians' civic office." The result is a fascinating glimpse into a largely unstudied aspect of U.S. political history and a look at the disappointing, if not depressing, weaknesses of the political, legal, and constitutional remedies available to deter or punish presidential malfeasance. Particularly rewarding are overviews written by Woodward and Banner, which include the sort of judgments that the authors of the individual reviews were directed to avoid.

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*Kissinger on Kissinger: Reflections on Diplomacy, Grand Strategy, and Leadership*  
BY WINSTON LORD. All Points Books, 2019, 176 pp.

Henry Kissinger has written about his time in government in lengthy books that often go into excruciating detail. This little volume, his only foray into oral history, does the opposite: it distills—and therein lies its attraction. As one man's view of events, it does not pretend to be a balanced history. But Kissinger's accounts of the strategies that he and U.S. President Richard Nixon pursued in a series of crucial events—the opening to China, the 1972 summit with Soviet leader Leonid Brezhnev, the first arms control negotiations with the Soviets—make for fascinating reading and serve as a timely reminder of what serious, farsighted diplomacy looks like. Participants must from the outset be able to answer the

question, “What are we trying to do here?” They must be deeply versed in the other side’s history and present interests, demonstrate steely patience, and know that the precondition for a successful negotiation is “victory for both sides.” Kissinger’s insightful conversations with Lord, a veteran diplomat who worked as a close aide to Kissinger, are refreshingly stripped of the formal language of a published memoir, allowing his insights to shine through.

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*Leap of Faith: Hubris, Negligence, and America’s Greatest Foreign Policy Tragedy*  
BY MICHAEL J. MAZARR.  
PublicAffairs, 2019, 528 pp.

Mazarr begins with the pundit George Will’s assessment that the decision to invade Iraq in 2003 was “worse than Vietnam, and the worst in American history.” Yet, he notes, we still don’t know when or how the decision to go to war was made: our understanding of why this catastrophe took place is “radically incomplete.” His attempt to close the gaps puts a great deal of the story into one thoroughly researched and eminently readable volume. Mazarr attributes the decision to invade to a characteristically American “missionary impulse” combined with “intuitive, value-driven judgment.” That’s a polite way of saying that the war was conceived by men and women who, although not evil, were so sure in their convictions regarding a country about which they knew hardly anything that they excused themselves from rigorous thought about what they were doing and why they were doing it and indulged in egregious distortions of the facts regarding Iraq’s weapons programs. It’s not obvious that there are lessons in this sorry tale that will

help avoid a repetition of those blunders and misdeeds. Ironically, Mazarr himself is unable to pinpoint when and how the decision to go to war was made. But his story is an important one, and well told.

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*Ill Winds: Saving Democracy From Russian Rage, Chinese Ambition, and American Complacency*  
BY LARRY DIAMOND. Penguin Press, 2019, 368 pp.

*If We Can Keep It: How the Republic Collapsed and How It Might Be Saved*  
BY MICHAEL TOMASKY. Liveright, 2019, 288 pp.

Diamond and Tomasky, both longtime students of democracy, have produced similarly impassioned works on the current democratic crisis. Diamond’s view is global, describing the worldwide slide toward authoritarianism over the past two decades. Tomasky focuses on what is happening in the United States, tracing the country’s current woes back almost to its founding. The global trends Diamond chronicles predate the election of U.S. President Donald Trump, but his analysis rests heavily on his “anguished knowledge” of what the Trump presidency means for governance around the world. By contrast, Tomasky writes that “most of this book could have appeared just as it now stands” no matter who won the 2016 election. Notwithstanding such differences, both authors identify the same ultimate saviors: not politicians or legal or constitutional changes but, in Diamond’s words, “the last line of defense: ‘We the People.’”

Diamond compellingly traces a “twelve-step program” that autocrats use to solidify their power. But he inflates the conventional military threats that the



United States faces from China and Russia. As his own analysis shows, the more pressing threat from both countries comes from their efforts to exploit fractures in the U.S. political system and the polarization of American society. His solutions include ranked-choice voting to strengthen candidates who appeal to the political center and independent commissions to put a stop to extreme gerrymandering.

Tomasky notes that most adults living in the United States today were born between 1945 and 1980, a period he terms “the Age of Consensus”—a brief interregnum in 200 years of otherwise intense partisan division. As a result, they are taken aback by today’s polarization even though it represents a return to the historical norm. The difference, however, is that in earlier eras, the two main parties were “divided within themselves as much as with each other.” Those broad, unstable coalitions had to negotiate positions internally. Today, a “near-total absence of intraparty polarization” has allowed the country to devolve into political tribalism. Tomasky convincingly describes how this happened but not why; nor can he explain why members of Congress compete so fiercely to dedicate their lives to an institution that gets almost nothing done. Tomasky’s list of fixes is almost identical to Diamond’s, but he concedes that many of those measures will take a very long time, or will make relatively little difference, or are merely “pies in the sky.”

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*The British Are Coming: The War for America, Lexington to Princeton, 1775–1777*  
BY RICK ATKINSON. Henry Holt, 2019, 800 pp.

It is hard to believe that the author of this sparkling, minutely detailed history

has not spent his entire career studying the American Revolutionary War. Yet Atkinson is best known as the author of acclaimed volumes on World War II. Like those books, his new one is mostly a military history, and less an account of the broader revolution. Still, Atkinson displays a remarkable ability to bring leaders and unnamed soldiers alike into three-dimensional clarity. Wonderful maps enrich the narrative and capture the reader’s imagination, distinguishing taverns from churches and rail fences from stone walls. Although the narrative at times wallows in the sheer physical misery of fighting and dying in a brutal war, few who read the prologue will want to put the book down until they’ve finished the whole thing.

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## Western Europe

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*Andrew Moravcsik*

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*The Unsettling of Europe: How Migration Reshaped a Continent*

BY PETER GATRELL. Basic Books, 2019, 576 pp.

**T**his important book puts today’s levels of migration to Europe in historical perspective. Far from being unprecedented, large population movements have been the norm since World War II, after which over 12 million people fled Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union. From the 1950s on, Eastern Europeans steadily left the Soviet bloc. In the 1960s, decolonization led millions to head for metropolises in the West, and guest workers came northward to Germany from countries

such as Turkey (although the great majority of these *Gastarbeiter* returned home). The end of the century saw further displacement caused by wars in the former Yugoslavia and waves of economic immigration. The author, a demographic historian, concludes with a dose of idealism: Europe should embrace immigration and diversity, which have made the continent what it is. Yet this seems to ignore political reality. Recent migration rates are the highest Europe has seen since the postwar movement of Germans. The percentage of foreign-born people in France, Germany, Italy, Sweden, and the United Kingdom is substantially higher than it was decades ago. In a period of low economic growth, European societies are grappling with tricky questions of cultural integration and difference. This book does surprisingly little to illuminate how many governments today face the political pressure to restrict immigration.

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*Eric Hobsbawm: A Life in History*  
BY RICHARD J. EVANS. Oxford University Press, 2019, 800 pp.

This biography traces the life of Eric Hobsbawm, one of the greatest historians of the twentieth century and an unrepentant communist. His story, with all its contradictions, parallels that of many radical leftist intellectuals in Europe during the middle of the century. A lower-class Jewish orphan who grew up in Vienna and Berlin during the 1930s, Hobsbawm took to the streets to fight fascists and reasonably concluded that strict solidarity with a radical party was the only way to make political change. He never renounced communism, as so many other leftists ultimately did. But he did come to

place greater value on intellectual diversity, tolerant leadership, and grassroots organization within left-wing politics. Hobsbawm's writings helped revolutionize the historical profession. He wrote omnivorously, on banditry, Luddism, local anarchism, rural uprisings, agricultural collectives, and other forms of working-class and peasant resistance to the march of industrialization. In later life, as a respected university professor and BBC lecturer, he penned a series of revisionist Marxist histories of Europe's industrialization, revolutions, and empires that became bestsellers—not least in the developing world, which was then undergoing similar upheavals.

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*Protest and Power: The Battle for the Labour Party*

BY DAVID KOGAN. Bloomsbury, 2019, 448 pp.

Two decades after the triumph of “New Labour” under Tony Blair, why is the British Labour Party run by a left-wing radical who favors nationalization, coddles autocrats, flirts with anti-Semitism, and lacks either the will or the ability to oppose Brexit outright? Based on detailed interviews and crammed with juicy anecdotes, this book is in many ways the definitive chronicle of Jeremy Corbyn's unlikely march from backbench obscurity to party leadership. Like many accounts by insider journalists, however, its underlying explanation rests almost entirely on personalities, accidents, errors, and dumb luck. From this perspective, the reemergence of the Labour left resulted from a backlash against Blair's involvement in the Iraq war, changes that “democratized” Labour party rules and boosted radicals over moderates, and New Labour's

mismanaged privatization policies. Kogan neglects to trace the larger forces—including globalization, inequality, deindustrialization, and nationalism—that have undermined the political order in every Western democracy, not just in the United Kingdom.

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*The Silk Road Trap: How China's Trade Ambitions Challenge Europe*

BY JONATHAN HOLSLAG. Polity, 2019, 232 pp.

Holslag claims that China poses a mortal economic threat to Europe and the West. The topic is timely, since the EU is currently considering following the United States in tightening controls on Chinese trade and investment. Of course, this book is hardly the first to list Beijing's sins: bilateral trade surpluses, unfair treatment of foreign investors and firms, and forced technology transfers. Nor does it contain original data or rigorous analysis. For example, nowhere does Holslag explain why bilateral deficits and debt should matter to a region that runs a net external surplus or specify exactly what political threats a competitive China poses to Europe. The author argues, however, that what is needed is less theory and more policy analysis: in the introduction, he suggests that European countries need to band together and act decisively in order to maximize their economic growth. It is surprising, therefore, that the conclusion proposes no specific policies except, in just one sentence, the adoption of stronger but fewer European standards.

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*Hitler: A Global Biography*

BY BRENDAN SIMMS. Basic Books, 2019, 704 pp.

Too many books are written about Hitler. Many are amateur efforts, and even those

that aren't rarely add anything new. Yet this vivid and painstakingly researched volume revises fundamentally how historians ought to view the geopolitical motivations of the Nazi leader. Simms argues that Hitler did not see the Soviet Union as the primary obstacle to his expansionist ambitions. From the start, his real enemies were the United Kingdom and the United States, the victors of World War I, the conflict that had decisively shaped his worldview. These countries were (from Hitler's perspective) racially pure "Anglo-Saxon" superpowers that possessed significant air and naval power, lorded over colonies, and molded the "plutocratic" system of international finance. Hitler's supposedly controversial strategic choices—such as diverting military resources to the Balkans, declaring an apparently needless war on the United States, launching a brutal attack on the Soviet Union, and even attempting to exterminate the Jews—were far more rational than most critics allow, given his often idiosyncratic assumptions. All these actions were part of a larger mobilization of resources and popular support for an inevitable war of attrition against the Anglo-Saxons. Some will dispute this thesis. Nevertheless, the book is engaging and essential reading for anyone interested in Hitler's policymaking.

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*The Future of British Foreign Policy: Security and Diplomacy in a World After Brexit*

BY CHRISTOPHER HILL. Polity, 2019, 256 pp.

This book by a respected Cambridge professor seeks to predict how Brexit will affect the United Kingdom's diplomacy and geopolitical standing. A classic academic policy book, it proceeds at a

leisurely pace. It takes a hundred pages to reach the central question: Will Brexit actually make any difference to British foreign policy? Or can London and its partners simply replicate their current levels of cooperation by other, perhaps more informal means? Here, Hill seems unsure. On the one hand, he persuasively dismisses as nonsense the rhetoric of Brexiteers about renewing special relationships with English-speaking peoples and forging bilateral agreements with China, India, Russia, and others. On the other hand, he recognizes that EU foreign policy is still decentralized, with member states allowed to set their own agendas, and that the United Kingdom has always played a “semi-detached” role in the making of EU foreign policy. How much will actually change? This fine overview concludes with more questions than answers.

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## Western Hemisphere

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*Richard Feinberg*

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*Silver, Sword, and Stone: Three Crucibles in the Latin American Story*

BY MARIE ARANA. Simon & Schuster, 2019, 496 pp.

*Fifth Sun: A New History of the Aztecs*

BY CAMILLA TOWNSEND. Oxford University Press, 2019, 336 pp.

**I**n trying to weave a coherent narrative of centuries of Latin American history, Arana too often relies on a handful of thin sources and simplifies complicated events. In her telling, venal, self-interested elites (“silver”), violent

rulers and rebels (“sword”), and cynical, compromised religious institutions (“stone”) have perennially plagued the region. The Aztecs, the Incas, and the Spanish were all bloody-minded peoples tamed only by brutal despots; home-grown revolutionaries inevitably became “tinpot dictators, insatiable caesars.”

Arana’s bleak vision sees no enduring success stories, no emerging middle-class democracies, no meaningful social progress. Latin America is defined only by “the essential exploitation at its core, the racial divisions, the extreme poverty . . . the corrosive culture of corruption.” By perpetuating such profoundly negative (and poorly substantiated) stereotypes, Arana inadvertently provides ammunition for U.S. President Donald Trump’s disparaging comments about the region.

In sharp contrast to Arana, who uses lurid, florid prose, Townsend employs the meticulous language of a scholar who has immersed herself in primary texts.

Townsend mined the accounts written in the Aztec language, Nahuatl, by indigenous historians in the decades immediately following the Spanish conquest.

These texts present an invaluable counterpoint to the self-serving narratives of the Spanish conquistadors and their priests. Townsend rejects the portrayal of the Aztecs as driven by blood lust, superstition, and fatalism. Instead, she shows that the Aztec emperor Montezuma II behaved rationally, drawing on his extensive intelligence-gathering system, carefully weighing his policy options, and tending to the responsibilities of government. The Spanish forces’ superior weaponry and access to reinforcements from Spain—coupled with the devastation wreaked by smallpox—eventually led to the defeat of



the Aztecs. Other histories have also shown how the Spanish conquistador Hernán Cortés skillfully exploited divisions among the indigenous tribes, who aligned with the Spanish often out of spite for the Aztecs. But Townsend's book is still a landmark masterpiece, powerful in its precision and subtle in its weaving of tragedy and glory.

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*Lost Children Archive: A Novel*

BY VALERIA LUISELLI. Knopf, 2019, 400 pp.

The daring fiction and nonfiction of Luiselli, a New York-based, Mexican-born writer, combine literary brilliance, empathetic politics, and a dazzling imagination. She has the intellectual firepower to be her generation's Susan Sontag (whose interest in collection, documentation, and memory Luiselli references) but possesses an even wider, more global sensibility. In her novel *Lost Children Archive*, Luiselli conjures a couple with two young children, aged ten and five, on a long road trip from New York to the southwestern United States in search of the grave of the Apache leader Geronimo. The novel's "lost children" include the last Apaches as well as today's desperate young migrants from Central America. Eventually (spoiler alert), the couple's two children go missing. Luiselli envisions the Southwest as desolate and haunted by genocide, a xenophobic wasteland occupied by a brutal border patrol. The loving interplay between the two children lightens the brooding atmosphere. Miraculously, the children never quarrel during long hours of driving, instead amusing themselves with songs, word games, and fantasies. In Luiselli's deft hands, children are our shame and our redemption.

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*The Caribbean Policy of the Ulysses S. Grant Administration: Foreshadowing an Informal Empire*

BY STEPHEN McCULLOUGH.  
Lexington Books, 2017, 230 pp.

After the Civil War, the United States embraced its "manifest destiny" to expand not only westward to the Pacific Ocean but also southward into the Caribbean. U.S. leaders actively considered the annexation of Cuba and the Dominican Republic, spurred by the lobbying of wealthy pro-annexation elites from both nations, who found a ready audience in corrupt, Gilded Age Washington. The case for annexation fell apart after wrangling between Congress and the Grant administration; however, a consensus emerged in Washington that the United States should replace Spain and the United Kingdom as the dominant foreign power in the Caribbean and that it was necessary to set up naval bases and coaling stations across the basin to protect an eventual transoceanic canal in Central America. U.S. officials differed on how to achieve these goals. Some argued for direct military intervention; others preached patience in allowing U.S. commercial power to organically secure greater influence in the Caribbean. These opposing visions of how the United States should project its power in the world still lie at the heart of foreign policy debates today.

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*Rojo*

DIRECTED BY BENJAMIN  
NAISHTAT. Bord Cadre Films, 2018.

This thoughtful, disturbing melodrama is set in a nondescript provincial town in Argentina in 1975. The film's action

occurs just prior to the 1976 military coup that launched the “Dirty War,” a period of repression that would end up killing thousands of Argentines. Naishtat focuses on the silence and complicity of average citizens more interested in safeguarding their own modest, quiet lives than in resisting the atrocities visited on their neighbors and peers by right-wing death squads, which were already “disappearing” opponents even before the coup. The film is dedicated to a recently deceased legal defender of political prisoners. The protagonist is Claudio, an aloof, rather haughty lawyer, well respected in his community. He gradually becomes aware of the horrors occurring all around him, but he does not get involved. Claudio’s moral center collapses utterly when he decides to make quick profits from the empty properties of victims of state terrorism. Naishtat skillfully mixes mundane scenes of daily life (birthday parties, tennis matches) with noir atmospherics and absurdist comedy. Could it happen here? The film reminds viewers everywhere that, indeed, it did happen in Argentina and that it was all too easy for many Argentines to avert their gaze from the state-sponsored violence of the Dirty War.

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## Eastern Europe and Former Soviet Republics

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*Maria Lipman*

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*We Need to Talk About Putin: How the West Gets Him Wrong*

BY MARK GALEOTTI. Ebury Press, 2019, 160 pp.

Galeotti is an established authority on Russia’s criminal underworld and on the country’s formidable security service and other uniformed agencies. His new book, however, follows a trend among studies of Russia by seeking to explain what President Vladimir Putin really stands for. But unlike most such accounts, Galeotti’s manages to completely overturn the conventional wisdom. The result is easily the shrewdest and most insightful analysis yet of Putin’s policymaking. Putin is not a “cool genius,” Galeotti writes; rather, he is an opportunist without a master plan. His system is an “ad hococracy,” in which lackeys do not receive direct instructions but instead rely on hints and guesses to determine what will please the boss. Putin is not a champion of conservatism; indeed, he holds no particular philosophy. There is one thing, however, Putin feels strongly about on a gut level: he is a patriot, committed to making outsiders treat Russia as a great power. Putin is not a kleptocrat, says Galeotti: wealth may be important to him, but the thing that drives him is power, not money. Some of Galeotti’s insights may not be new to close observers of Russia. But nonexperts will appreciate his brevity and his reader-friendly style.

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*Catherine and Diderot: The Empress, the Philosopher, and the Fate of the Enlightenment*

BY ROBERT ZARETSKY. Harvard University Press, 2019, 272 pp.

Zaretsky is a historian of France and, as he admits, a newcomer to Russian history. Hence, his short and entertaining book tells readers more about Denis Diderot than about the Russian empress who invited the leading Enlightenment philosopher to St. Petersburg. When the 60-year-old Diderot arrived in Russia in 1773, it was the first time he had ventured far from home. He shared with other French philosophers of his time a view of Catherine the Great as the embodiment of enlightened despotism, a leader driven by a faith in reason and progress and dedicated to ensuring the happiness of her subjects. As the book makes clear, the philosopher initially seemed poised to realize his dream of playing mentor to the monarch. Catherine eagerly engaged in debates with Diderot. She was enthralled by his audacious thinking, and he respected her devotion to Enlightenment ideals. Mutual disenchantment was, of course, inevitable. Diderot eventually concluded that the concept of enlightened despotism was an oxymoron and that Catherine, alas, was merely a despot. Catherine, meanwhile, gradually came to see philosophers as useless, their writings paving the way to endless calamities. Still, Zaretsky cannot help but admire Catherine and Diderot's mutual affection, which their mutual disappointment did not diminish.

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*An Impeccable Spy: Richard Sorge, Stalin's Master Agent*

BY OWEN MATTHEWS. Bloomsbury, 2019, 448 pp.

Richard Sorge was a German enraptured with communism. In 1929, he became a Soviet spy in the Far East. Operating in Japan from 1933 until his arrest in late 1941, Sorge became a close adviser to the German ambassador in Tokyo and built a formidable espionage machine at a time when all foreigners were under close scrutiny from Japanese authorities. Sorge's main mission was to find out whether Japan was planning to attack the Soviet Union. But his most famous report was one that warned of Germany's imminent invasion in 1941—a warning that was dismissed by his bosses, who were fearful of contradicting Stalin's belief that Hitler would not breach the Nazi-Soviet Nonaggression Pact. Matthews' meticulously researched book draws in particular on materials from Soviet intelligence archives that have never before been accessed by a Western historian. These documents show that, despite the vital intelligence he provided, the Soviets always regarded Sorge as a potential traitor. Matthews' book is a spy thriller that doubles as an enthralling history of revolutionary Germany in the 1920s, Tokyo during the country's prewar militarization, and Moscow in the 1930s, where Stalin's mass terror consumed, among others, seven of Sorge's military intelligence bosses.

*The Russian Job: The Forgotten Story of How America Saved the Soviet Union From Ruin*  
BY DOUGLAS SMITH. Farrar, Straus  
and Giroux, 2019, 320 pp.

By the early 1920s, the Bolsheviks had won an outright victory over their class enemies within Russia. But the devastation caused by the four years of civil war eventually forced them to turn for help to their class enemies abroad. Smith tells the story of how the American Relief Administration rescued Soviet Russia when it was struck by the worst famine Europe had ever known. Based on rich archival materials, his book focuses on a group of young Americans who set off for Russia, lured by the exotic and the unknown, and found themselves in the middle of a horrific tragedy. ARA members and the Soviets they hired operated in a vast territory where whole villages were dying of hunger, corpses were being left unburied along the roads, and reports of cannibalism were not uncommon. Rare photos included in the book lend Smith's account an eerie vividness. During the two years the ARA spent there, it saved millions of lives in some 28,000 towns and villages by providing food, medical supplies, and disinfectants, as well as restoring hospitals, purifying water, and organizing mass inoculations. The ARA's head, Herbert Hoover, believed that by rescuing Soviet Russia from hunger, the U.S. government could also rescue it from communism. He left deeply disappointed. But to the young Americans who staffed the ARA, the experience delivered an existential intensity that, once back home, they longed for but could never quite find again.

*Vasily Grossman and the Soviet Century*  
BY ALEXANDRA POPOFF. Yale  
University Press, 2019, 424 pp.

Vasily Grossman was a humanist bearing witness to an inhuman age. The Russian writer's dispatches from the Battle of Stalingrad described Red Army soldiers as freedom fighters facing down the fascist menace, and they cemented his literary fame. In 1944, Grossman was among the first to report on the Nazis' Treblinka death camp. After the war, Grossman extended his lens to depict Stalin's regime as a foe of humanity, as well. He went further still, taking aim at all the parties to the Cold War that were amassing weapons of mass destruction. Unfortunately, Grossman's universal concerns take a back seat in Popoff's biography, which presents the writer as a Western-style dissident in conflict with the Soviet state. Her account flattens Grossman's complex humanism, in which progressive nineteenth-century traditions mixed with the pathos of the Soviet revolution and—later in his life—westernizing impulses. Drawing a straight line from the Stalinist past to the present, Popoff claims that Russia under Vladimir Putin is once more sidelining Grossman. But she makes no mention of a serialized production of his novel *Life and Fate* that aired on official Russian television in 2012 and garnered prizes and rave reviews. This book is a missed opportunity to more fully engage with a writer whose abiding moral concerns reached far beyond the Soviet Union and remain vital after the passing of the communist state.

JOCHEN HELLBECK



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*Understanding Russia: The Challenges of Transformation*

BY MARLENE LARUELLE AND JEAN RADVANYI. Rowman & Littlefield, 2018, 184 pp.

Instead of rekindling Western powers' historical fears of Russia, Laruelle and Radvanyi present the country as an "ambivalent" nation—part of a continuum of Western politics rather than an outlier. The authors skillfully place Russia's 30-year transformation since the Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev's perestroika reforms in the context of broader developments in Europe, North America, and elsewhere. This slim but wide-ranging volume comes at a crucial time, as growing domestic unrest tests Russian President Vladimir Putin's 20-year rule and as opposition mounts to his repression of dissenting voices. At the same time, the book is also a forceful reminder that "Russia is much more than its president" and that understanding the country requires nuanced consideration that goes beyond merely analyzing Putin. The authors explain, for instance, how the Kremlin has channeled both nationalism and globalism in addressing a slew of Russia's problems, including the disparities between urban and rural life and a persistent brain drain. Laruelle and Radvanyi argue that although Russia wants to advance an alternative to the current world order, its motivations are more complicated and less sinister than many Western pundits assert.

NINA KHRUSHCHEVA

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Middle East

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*John Waterbury*

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*Assad or We Burn the Country: How One Family's Lust for Power Destroyed Syria*

BY SAM DAGHER. Little, Brown, 2019, 592 pp.

*Syria's Secret Library: Reading and Redemption in a Town Under Siege*

BY MIKE THOMSON. PublicAffairs, 2019, 320 pp.

These two books offer wildly contrasting portrayals of the regime of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad and the hugely destructive civil war that has raged in Syria since 2011. Dagher started reporting from Damascus for *The Wall Street Journal* in 2012. He interviewed key actors and dissidents, among them Manaf Tlass, once a close friend of the ruling Assad family. Manaf's father was a regime stalwart, a longtime defense minister, and a key liaison between the Alawite Assads and the majority Sunni population of Syria. Manaf eventually defected from the regime after Assad brutally suppressed the largely Sunni opposition. Dagher tells a story of paranoia and unbridled violence. He is unequivocal in his condemnation of the Assad regime and catalogs the world's acquiescence in the regime's brutality, enabled in part by the focus on battling the Islamic State (or ISIS). Dagher

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—Stephanie Solomon, Chief Revenue Officer

interviewed some survivors of Assad's torture centers, who afford hope for a better future, but otherwise, this book chronicles the triumph of evil.

Some of those torture survivors are the subject of Thomson's moving chronicle of the four-year siege of Daraya, a suburb of Damascus that was once home to 90,000 people. Thomson, a BBC correspondent, learned that among those who remained in the suburb were a number of young Darayans who collected books to establish a secret, underground library, sheltered from the barrel bombs, snipers, and tanks of Assad's forces. The library became the embodiment of both resistance and the hope for a more humane future. Thomson never visited Daraya and knew his heroes only through Skype and WhatsApp. Still, he became fast friends with the insurgent librarians. Rebels in Daraya held out for four years, enduring famine and trauma. In the summer of 2016, they were evacuated by the regime to Idlib province, which itself is now under attack by Assad's forces. Syrian troops unearthed and looted the secret library.

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*Hezbollah: Mobilization and Power*

BY AURÉLIE DAHER. Hurst, 2019, 432 pp.

Daher considers how the Shiite militant group Hezbollah gained legitimacy through its resistance to Israeli incursions in Lebanon. Hezbollah went from strength to strength after Israel withdrew from southern Lebanon in 2000 and after its partial victory against an Israeli incursion in the summer of 2006. Her book was first published in French in 2014 and does not investigate how Hezbollah decided to go to war in Syria on behalf of

Bashar al-Assad in 2011. It takes some mental gymnastics to see how Hezbollah's role in Syria either mounts resistance to Israel or defends the territory of Lebanon. Daher has spent years in the Bekaa Valley close to Hezbollah strongholds. Her portrayal of the organization is rather sympathetic. The book's strongest feature is its analysis of the charismatic appeal of Hezbollah's secretary-general, Hassan Nasrallah. Daher's superficial treatment of the organization's finances—and the group's consequent ability to eschew corruption and rent seeking—is less satisfying. The author refutes accusations of terrorism leveled at Hezbollah, particularly the findings of the international tribunal that investigated the 2005 assassination of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri. She challenges the evidence that Hezbollah was behind this killing and other violent incidents.

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*Iran Resurgent: The Rise and Rise of the Shia State*

BY MAHAN ABEDIN. Hurst, 2019, 272 pp.

Abedin packs an extraordinary amount into this compact and lucid survey of regime dynamics and grand strategy in Iran. The author is a British Iranian journalist who writes with the style of an insider. He riffs on the regime's internal politics and traces the roles and decision-making of key players. Much of the book is devoted to Iran's foreign policy, particularly in the Middle East. Abedin stresses that Iran's relationship with Syria is no mere tactical alliance. To force Iran out of Syria is "an impossible task." Syria is Iran's only formal ally and the linchpin of Iran's "axis of resistance," an anti-U.S. and anti-Israeli alliance spanning Iran, Syria, Hezbollah

in Lebanon, Iraqi militias, and the Houthis in Yemen. With or without nuclear weapons, Iran can project power through much of the Arab world. What it lacks in advanced weaponry it makes up for in granular knowledge of the region, experience fighting various kinds of wars, and superior intelligence gathering. Although Iranians are weary of sanctions, the government remains strong, and in the absence of an invasion by an outside power, regime change seems unlikely.

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*Spear to the West: Thought and Recruitment in Violent Jihadism*

BY STEPHEN CHAN. Hurst, 2019, 176 pp.

This small tome is packed and requires some rereading to fully grasp the argument. Chan, the founding dean of the University of London's School of Oriental and African Studies, dismisses the notion that violent jihadism feeds off poverty and marginalization. Rather, jihadism draws from a line of reasoning that is "modernist" and poses a stark alternative to liberal globalization. Chan dips in and out of brief sketches of influential thinkers (including the medieval Sunni theologian Ibn Taymiyyah and the twentieth-century writer and activist Sayyid Qutb); he selects them based on the number of clicks each figure gets in Internet searches. He undermines some of his argument by conceding that contemporary jihadis don't always read these thinkers. The author outlines the 12 steps that lead to the online recruitment of jihadis, but he offers no evidence that this method is especially prevalent or important. Chan's argument can be a bit hard to follow, but it has at least two major implications: only those capable of speaking within the

ideological terms of jihadis can counter their appeal, and counterterrorism strategists must consider using the Internet in ways they have not yet tried.

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## Asia and Pacific

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*Andrew J. Nathan*

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*China's New Red Guards: The Return of Radicalism and the Rebirth of Mao Zedong*

BY JUDE BLANCHETTE. Oxford University Press, 2019, 224 pp.

*Minjian: The Rise of China's Grassroots Intellectuals*

BY SEBASTIAN VEG. Columbia University Press, 2019, 368 pp.

A contentious struggle between reformers and conservatives marked Chinese politics in the first decade of Deng Xiaoping's reforms. That battle seemed to have disappeared after the 1989 Tiananmen crackdown, but in fact it had migrated from politics to intellectual life. As the post-Deng leadership was busy shrinking the role of state-owned enterprises and pushing China deeper into the global trading economy, intellectuals on the left used academic conferences and the Internet to mount critiques of neoliberalism and globalization, arguing that these policies coddled capitalists, hurt workers, and sold out China's sovereignty. Although some leftists called for a "second Cultural Revolution," they did not use violence, as the Red Guards had done in an earlier era. But they shared with the Red Guards the same

veneration of Mao Zedong as the avatar of an egalitarian, anti-Western development model. With his rich description of personalities and issues, Blanchette brings these sometimes windy debates to life, revealing a little-known inner script of Chinese politics.

During the same period, other thinkers retreated from the ambitious theorizing that had been fashionable in the 1980s to focus on the concrete problems of migrant workers, sex workers, petitioners, and victims of Maoist persecution. Veg thoughtfully situates these “grassroots intellectuals” in a social history of Chinese thinkers and delves into their personal histories, their work, and their debates with one another. They used fiction and essays, newspaper reports, oral history, documentary films, blogs, and lawsuits to argue for creative freedom, expose the crimes of the Mao years, and promote social justice and the rule of law. Their program converged with that of the Maoist left in its concern for the underprivileged, but they did not share the left’s hatred of the West or its endorsement of authoritarianism. The authorities for the most part tolerated the leftists—partly because many of them came from elite Communist families—but subjected the grassroots liberals to censorship, tax investigations, closings of publications and think tanks, detentions, and arrests.

Since he came to power in 2012, Xi Jinping has acted on the belief of Blanchette’s “new Red Guards” that the state must be dominant in order to withstand attacks from enemies at home and abroad. He also shares their view that any criticism of Mao is an attack on the legitimacy of the Chinese Communist Party. The regime clamps down hard on liberal writers and activists and arrests

leftist students who try to support workers’ strikes. Yet on the evidence of these two books, it is unlikely that even a regime as repressive as Xi’s can completely stifle Chinese intellectual life.

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*Special Duty: A History of the Japanese Intelligence Community*

BY RICHARD J. SAMUELS. Cornell University Press, 2019, 384 pp.

In the early twentieth century, adventurous Japanese businessmen, diplomats, and military officers produced on-the-ground information that helped Japan defeat Russia and invade China. But Japanese intelligence gathering went into decline thereafter. Military domination of intelligence work fostered groupthink, which led to spectacular mistakes, such as underestimating the U.S. response to the attack on Pearl Harbor. After World War II, Japan’s intelligence agencies suffered from weak public support, turf battles, a failure to share information, and constant leaking. With the end of the Cold War, the rise of China, the growing threat from North Korea, and the relative decline of U.S. power, a series of Japanese prime ministers started strengthening the system. They tightened classification rules, invested in cybersecurity, and established the Defense Intelligence Headquarters and, later, the National Security Council to improve communication among agencies. This engrossing history of Japanese intelligence demonstrates how such changes have made Japan a better security partner for the United States while preparing the country to stand on its own if the U.S. security guarantee loses its credibility.



*Nightmarch: Among India's Revolutionary Guerrillas*

BY ALPA SHAH. University of Chicago Press, 2019, 320 pp.

Over years of fieldwork, the anthropologist Shah gained unusual access to the leftist Naxalite insurgency that has persisted in the hills and forests of central and eastern India for over 50 years. She builds her analysis around a dramatic narrative of a seven-night, 155-mile march she took with a platoon of guerillas. The Maoist movement is rooted in disadvantaged Adivasi, or tribal, communities and led by educated, middle-class cadres from elsewhere in the country. Shah dismisses theories that peasants join insurgencies for economic benefits or for protection, emphasizing instead the emotional bonds the guerillas form with young Adivasis by treating them as equals. She balances her mostly favorable picture of the insurgency with accounts of how movement leaders insinuate themselves alongside bureaucrats and politicians into the informal economy of protection payoffs and illegal logging, how some guerillas join mercenary gangs that cooperate with the police, and how the movement's Maoist doctrine on gender repression blinds it to the relatively egalitarian reality of Adivasi gender relations. Her recurring theme is the unending cycle of violence among exploitative landlords, the oppressed tribal people, and the military, whose frontline soldiers are also young Adivasis.

*Mongolia's Foreign Policy: Navigating a Changing World*

BY ALICIA CAMPI. Lynne Rienner, 2019, 349 pp.

Campi provides a richly informative survey of Mongolian foreign policy

since the country's transition in 1990 from communism to a troubled but still functioning democracy. Whatever the state of Mongolia's domestic politics, the enduring geostrategic reality is the presence of two large, intrusive neighbors, China and Russia. Mongolia's "third neighbor" policy offsets their influence by pursuing relations with as many other countries and institutions as possible, including the United States, the EU, and Asian democracies—and also North Korea, which Mongolian officials see as a potential transit route to the Pacific, and Iran and Turkey, two countries seeking to diversify their own foreign relations. Mongolia has been less successful in avoiding economic dependence on China. The collapse of the Soviet Union led to the "renomadization" of much of the Mongolian workforce when trade and aid from Moscow ended, leaving the economy increasingly reliant on Chinese investments in and purchases from the country's coal, copper, and iron mines and oil fields. The only way out of this dependency would be to strengthen links with other economies, which ironically would depend on persuading Beijing to include Mongolia in its Belt and Road Initiative.

*The Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere: When Total Empire Met Total War*

BY JEREMY A. YELLEN. Cornell University Press, 2019, 306 pp.

The Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere, a supranational framework promoted by Japan from the 1930s to 1945, has a bad reputation in history as a thin disguise for World War II-era Japanese imperialism. But Yellen shows

that it was an authentic vision—however murky and evolving—for a new kind of regional order. Drawing on what were then widely accepted ideas about racial hierarchies, regional economic blocs, and economic planning, the sphere’s advocates envisioned Asia as a “familial community” that would free itself from European exploitation under the leadership of an advanced Japan. Each nation would perform its economic role according to its natural abilities, coordinated by a planning system that would ensure a share in common prosperity for everyone. Nationalist elites in Burma and the Philippines—two case studies Yellen uses to illustrate Asian responses to this vision—thought they would be freer in an empire run according to those principles than in the British and American empires, to which their countries belonged, respectively, at the time. This study suggests that Japanese thinking during the war was not so different from that of other ambitious powers throughout history, which believed they were helping other peoples by dominating them.

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*Chairman Xi Remakes the PLA: Assessing Chinese Military Reforms*

EDITED BY PHILLIP C. SAUNDERS, ARTHUR S. DING, ANDREW SCOBELL, ANDREW N. D. YANG, AND JOEL WUTHNOW. National Defense University Press, 2019, 782 pp.

This terrific book definitively assesses the ongoing reforms to China’s armed forces that General Secretary Xi Jinping announced in late 2015. The reforms seek to strengthen the People’s Liberation Army’s operational effectiveness and ability to conduct joint operations in what Chinese strategists call

“informationized local wars,” recognizing the importance of information and data to modern warfare. The authors of this edited volume are leading observers and analysts of the PLA and Chinese defense affairs. Eighteen meticulously researched chapters examine all aspects of the reforms, including their motivations, the changes to command structures they have brought about, and their effect on civil-military relations. The reforms are unprecedented in their scale and scope, abolishing the old general-staff system, strengthening the party’s Central Military Commission, and creating new theater commands to make the armed forces more agile in war.

M. TAYLOR FRAVEL

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## Africa

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*Nicolas van de Walle*

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*African Americans and Africa: A New History*

BY NEMATA AMELIA IBITAYO BLYDEN. Yale University Press, 2019, 280 pp.

**B**lyden has produced a fascinating book on the relationship between African Americans and the African continent from the era of slavery, to the late-nineteenth-century movements to return African Americans to West Africa, to the twentieth-century civil rights movement, to the eventual presidency of Barack Obama in the twenty-first century. She skillfully reveals the emergence and evolution of a distinctly African American

identity through the writings and lives of black intellectuals, ranging from the eighteenth-century ex-slave and poet Phillis Wheatley to later figures such as the historian and activist W. E. B. Du Bois and the author Richard Wright. A recurring theme of the book is that African Americans have looked to Africa when their prospects in the United States have seemed particularly bleak and unpromising. Blyden also notes the ambiguity of that longing for Africa; for many African Americans, engagement with the continent has sparked a recognition of their distinctly American identity as much as it has engendered a sense of solidarity with Africans. Over a million Africans have immigrated to the United States in the last 30 years, a trend that may again remake black America.

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*The Scramble for Europe: Young Africa on Its Way to the Old Continent*  
BY STEPHEN SMITH. Polity, 2019, 200 pp.

In this sometimes rambling but always interesting long essay, Smith directly tackles the issue of African immigration to Europe only in the last couple of chapters. The preceding sections focus on recent socioeconomic trends in Africa, with a particular emphasis on the continent's demographics. Smith makes the familiar idea of an African "youth bulge" (in which high fertility results in a very young population) more compelling by documenting a new dividing line when it comes to inequality in the region: age. Today, in countries across the continent, a minority of older people is trying to retain its political and economic privileges at the expense of a younger cohort. Smith argues that

inequality is one of the motivations for young Africans to undertake the very dangerous trip to Europe but suggests that a "sense of adventure" spurs their journeys, as well. Although he laments the region's poverty, he views sharp increases in the number of African immigrants to Europe as inevitable, even if African economies continue their recent acceleration. Greater access to funds and closer links with Europe will strengthen both the ability and the desire of would-be immigrants to make the trip. The book ends on a sour note, arguing that this scramble for Europe will only sap Africa of the energy it needs to confront its own challenges and will increase unemployment and undermine welfare states in Europe.

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*Amílcar Cabral: A Nationalist and Pan-Africanist Revolutionary*  
BY PETER KARIBE MENDY. Ohio University Press, 2019, 238 pp.

This accessible biography of Amílcar Cabral will not satisfy readers wanting to better understand why some consider him one of the most thoughtful left-wing rebels of the twentieth century, rivaling Lenin and Mao in his analyses of state power and revolutionary struggle. Mendy often draws such grandiose comparisons but fails to substantiate them. But he does succeed in following the fascinating arc of Cabral's life. Cabral went from an impoverished youth in the Portuguese colonies of Cape Verde and Guinea-Bissau to a university scholarship in Lisbon. He had a brief but illustrious career as an agricultural engineer for the Portuguese colonial government before he became a revolutionary advocate of independence and the leader of an

armed guerrilla movement in Guinea-Bissau. He was gunned down in mysterious circumstances by a disgruntled lieutenant a year before the country won its independence, in 1974. Cabral tirelessly sought international support for his movement, and Mendy ably describes the pace and spirit of the international anticolonial circuit of the 1960s and early 1970s, with Cabral jetting to endless rounds of consultations in capitals such as Havana and Bucharest and addressing the UN's Special Committee on Decolonization, all while trying to outwit Portuguese intelligence services.

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*Adventures in Zambian Politics: A Story in Black and White*

BY GUY SCOTT. Lynne Rienner, 2019, 259 pp.

Born in what was then Northern Rhodesia to British parents, Scott renounced his British citizenship and chose to remain in Zambia after the country won its independence in 1964. He has been a government economist, a farmer, a leader of a farmers' union, a democracy activist, one of the founders of the

Patriotic Front (the party currently in power), and a vice president under the presidency of Michael Sata. Scott briefly became acting president, for three months, in late 2014, after Sata's death. In this engaging and often witty memoir surveying his career, Scott revels in the fact that this last credential makes him the only white person to have served as president in an African electoral democracy. His memoir is particularly entertaining concerning recent Zambian politics, with its nasty personal rivalries and underhanded conspiracies. Scott recounts with great insight the rise of the Patriotic Front through two national elections. He is a modest narrator, and the real hero of his story is Sata, his political patron and mentor. Although observers of Zambia often criticize Sata as an unscrupulous populist whose election in 2011 began the current democratic backsliding, he emerges from this book as an eccentric but brilliant political entrepreneur who cared deeply about Zambia and its people.🌍

IB OHLSSON has retired as *Foreign Affairs'* contributing artist. Beginning in 1994, Ohlsson produced more than 300 drawings for our pages. His wit and artistry have provided flashes of illumination and delight among the endless gray columns of text, and his gentle mockery has kicked the pedestals out from under legions of the high and mighty. We thank him for his contributions.

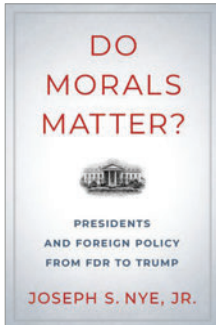
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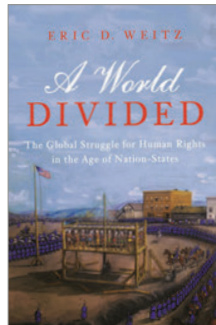
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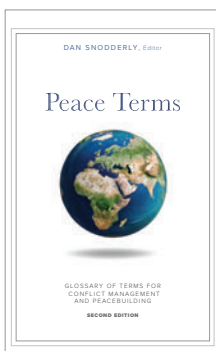
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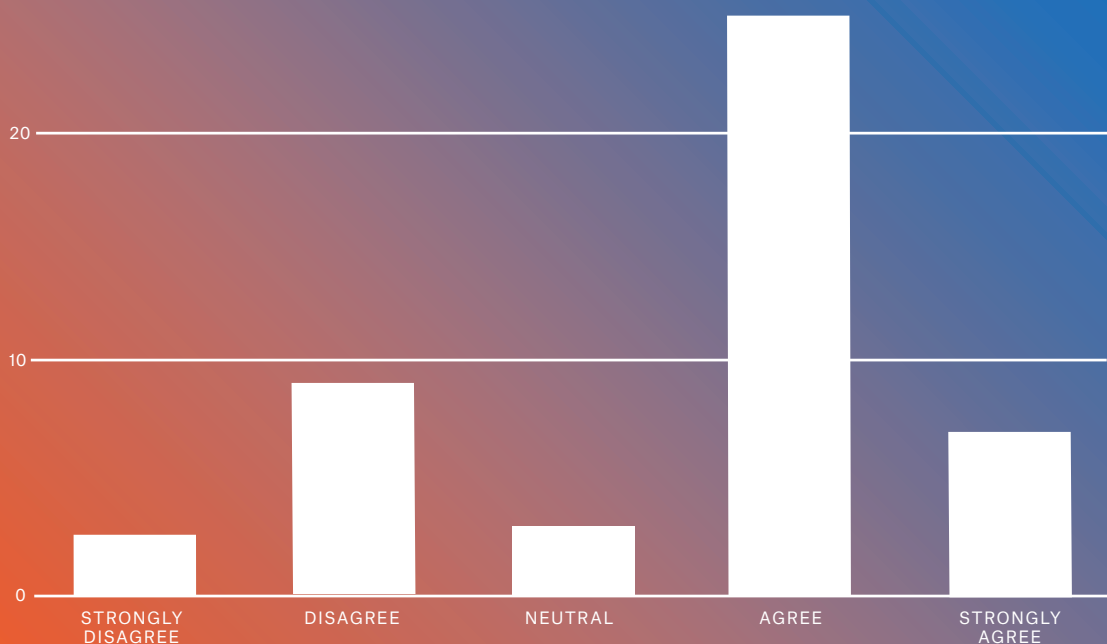
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# Was the War in Afghanistan a Mistake?

## Foreign Affairs Brain Trust

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**DISAGREE, CONFIDENCE LEVEL 10**

**Husain Haqqani**

Director for South and Central Asia at the Hudson Institute and former Pakistani Ambassador to the United States

“The United States could have left sooner had it actually committed to a sustained military presence. The war has been prolonged because the Taliban, and the Pakistani generals who back them, thought they could wait out the Americans, who constantly talked about getting out.”



**AGREE, CONFIDENCE LEVEL 8**

**Vikram Singh**

Senior Adviser to the Asia Program at the U.S. Institute of Peace and former Deputy Special Representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan at the U.S. State Department

“A sustainable and relatively small mission—consisting of Special Forces, intelligence, and training and support efforts—in pursuit of a political solution to the Afghan civil war is, and always was, the best approach.”

→ See the full responses at [ForeignAffairs.com/AfghanistanWar](https://ForeignAffairs.com/AfghanistanWar)



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